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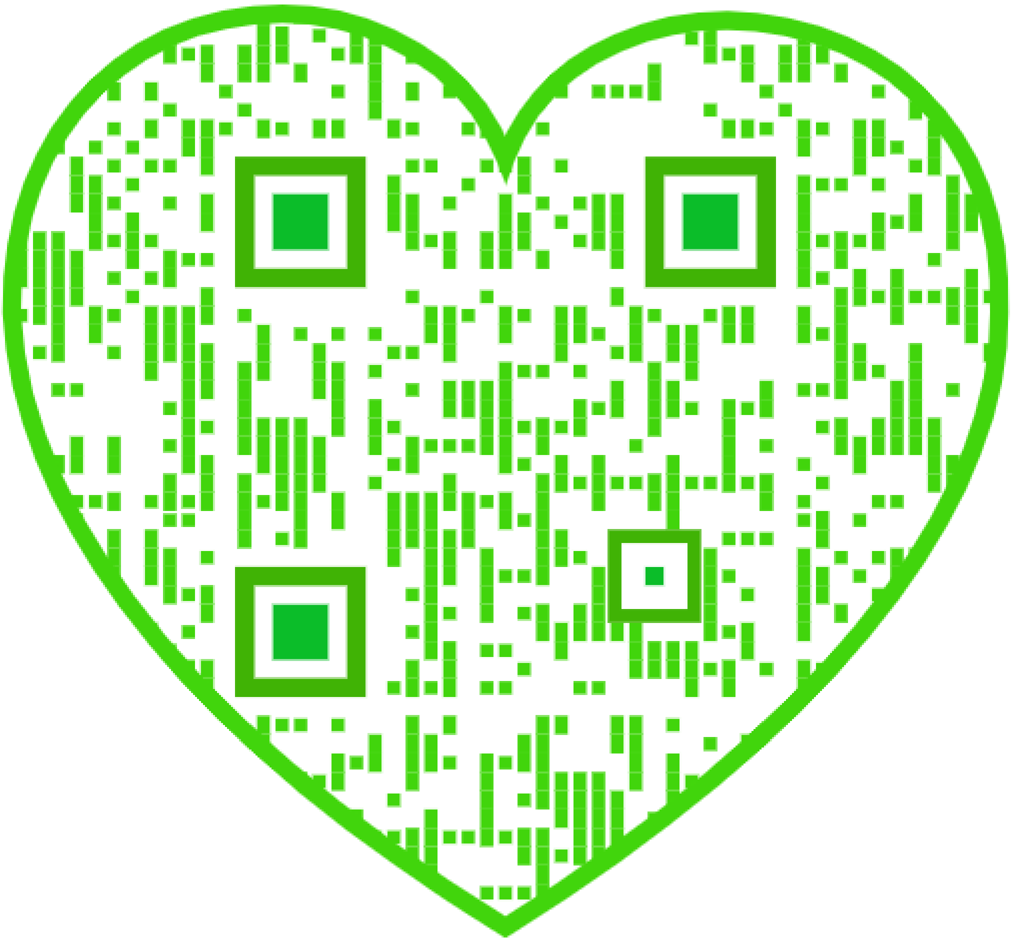

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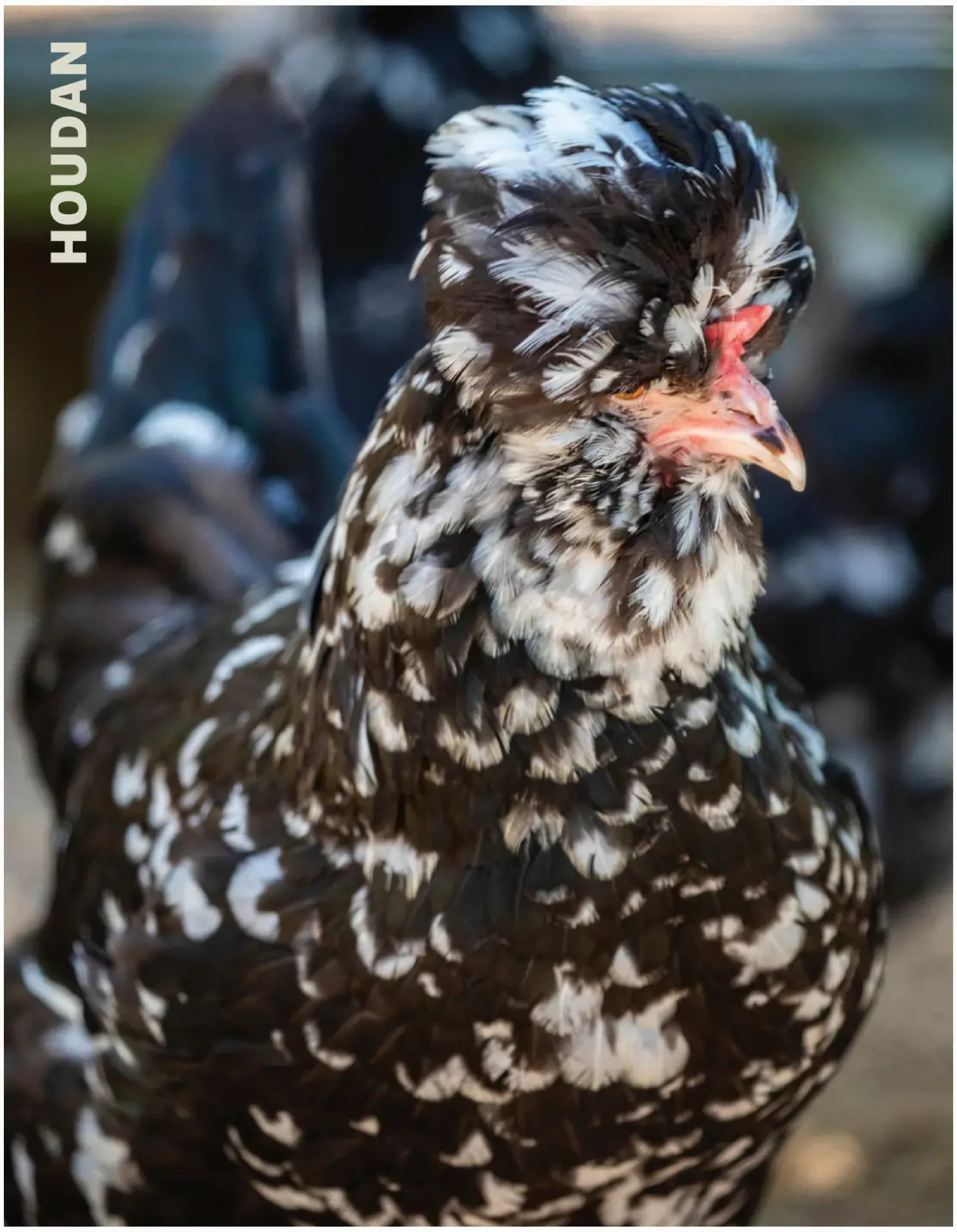
BREEDS *you need*

The Houdan chicken breed meets dual-purpose criteria as a great layer and table fowl. Hens are good layers of small white eggs, laying well into winter.

It's unclear when exactly the Houdan chicken breed was first established. According to Murray McMurray Hatchery, they were raised extensively on the many small farms near the village of Houdan in France, and this locale and the lovely black plumage in which many feathers are tipped with V-shaped white spots give them their name. Houdan lies about 100 miles outside of Paris and has a long history of supplying both meat and eggs to the French capital.



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The breed is possibly a cross of the Polish or Dorking chicken breeds and Crevecoeur chicken breed along with native five-toed chickens. Houdan chickens arrived in England in 1850 and then were brought to North America around 1865. The breed was admitted into the American Poultry Association's *Standard of Perfection* in 1874.

The APA recognizes two Houdan varieties: Mottled and White. Both have standard plumage. "The flowing crest, V-shaped comb, muff of feathers at the throat, and the fifth toe give them an unusual appearance and make them a standout in any poultry show," according to Murray McMurray Hatchery. "Houdans are fine boned, juicy, white skinned flesh, and they are good layers of white eggs. Although in the crested breed family, they are larger than Polish. Baby chicks are patched with black and white all over, and the little crest, beard, and fifth toe help identify them at once."

The Houdan chicken breed has received the coveted French "Label Rouge" for excellence in production and taste. Hens are somewhat heavy and sometimes break eggs. This can be avoided by not allowing a clutch to gather. To avoid soiling their unique feathering, farmers should consider shallow water bowls and covered runs. The Houdan is known to be exceptionally gentle, an excellent choice for hobby and urban farmers, as well as for children. It does well in confinement but will also forage in yards and free-range.

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MIA Chickens

It had been a typical Sunday, and by typical, I mean nothing went according to plan. My plans for a delicious breakfast came to naught when only half the family woke up to eat it. The stack of schoolwork I'd hoped to grade remained beside my laptop, untouched, while I tackled the disaster that our studio had become.

A quick trip to the market with my husband resulted in three carts' worth of groceries to load into the car. So when our son announced that Margie Orpington was missing, I took it as just par for the course.

For those who keep a backyard flock in an urban or suburban setting, a missing bird seems unthinkable. How could a chicken possibly get out of its tidy, contained coop-and-run combo or its fenced backyard?

For those of us who live in a rural residential or agricultural zone, however, discovering a member of our flock is missing at lock-up is not as uncommon as you'd think. When you combine free-ranging with a chicken's innate curiosity, you'll have plenty of reasons why you might be short one chicken.

If this happens to you when you're closing your coop for the night, don't panic. Take a deep breath. Then take on one or more of these five suggestions.

IS YOUR BIRD HAVING A SLUMBER PARTY?

If you raise multiple flocks of chickens, chances are your birds have not only noticed each other but have also communicated back and forth through clucks, warbles, crows and other vocalizations. Commonly, these calls keep each other informed of the status of their territory. This is especially true if you keep more than one rooster.

Occasionally, your birds' chatter may be more neighborly. Chickens will sort out where each of them stands in the expanded poultry society comprised of all your flocks. If you discover that one of your hens is missing, check your other coops.

I've lost count of how many times we've found members our BBS Orpington flock peacefully snoozing on the perch in the Buff Orpington coop and Buffs on the Blue Orpington perch. If your birds are having a sleepover, there's no need to disturb them (unless roosters are present and you breed separate varieties). Just sort everyone back out when you release them in the morning.

If you have more than one flock, sometimes a bird will jump to a new family.

YOUR MISSING CHICKEN COULD BE A HIGHFLYER

With few exceptions, chickens prefer their roosts several feet off the ground. According to Richard Fulton, a poultry-science professor at Michigan State University, the inclination to roost up high originates from an instinct to stay out of reach of ground-based predators.

Most birds are content with the height of their henhouse perches. But others look for higher ground. Our Dutch bantam, Cutie, and our Golden Sebright, Dennis, always perched up in the rafters of their coop, well above the heads

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of the rest of their flock. Dennis went missing one evening, and I spent several hours searching the surrounding forests for that tiny bird.

I finally gave up and headed back to the house. Then I caught an orange gleam high up in one of our maples. Sure enough, there was Dennis, cozy as could be and snoozing away.

If your missing chicken is a bantam or a breed that flies well, such as Ameraucana, Lakenvelder or Fayoumi, get your flashlight and search in the boughs of nearby trees. Chances are your lost chook is roosting on a low branch.

MAMMA MIA! (IT COULD BE BROODINESS)

Even if our coops are equipped with nest boxes, sometimes a girl in Mama Hen mode wants more privacy than we provide. Instead of setting eggs within the safety of their henhouses, these ladies venture out to find brooding grounds of their own.

Ten years ago, our Easter Egger, Keynoter, went missing from release until lock-up every day for more than two weeks. I finally tailed her to the woods on the southeast corner of our property. Here I discovered her — and her clutch of 18 eggs — tucked out of sight beneath a fallen tree.

Our Black Orpington, Fitz, pulled a similar stunt four years ago, except she did not return at night. We'd given her up for dead … until the weekend we were weeding around our pole barn. There was Fitz, all fluffed up and growling at us from beneath our overgrown rhubarb, where she was brooding nine eggs.

We were fortunate that our hens weren't overly adventurous. Mari, a local breeder I know, lost her award-winning Salmon Faverolle hen one summer evening a few years back. Her family searched everywhere for the sweet-tempered hen, to no avail.

About three weeks later, that Faverolle reappeared, trooping out of the forest and looking very worn, ratty and grumpy … with a troop of chicks accompanying her.

If your missing bird is a hen who has demonstrated a penchant for brooding, check under shrubs and bushes, beneath fallen trees and behind air-conditioning units. Look inside old tires, too. That's where we found Ebony Orpington and her egg-filled nest.

HOW TO DEAL WITH PREDATORY DANGER

Unfortunately, sometimes our birds don't leave of their own accord. Predators exist pretty

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much anywhere chickens live, especially if you live in a suburban, rural or agricultural area.

While many predators leave behind vivid evidence of their visits, some grab and go with minimal disruption. If your hen seems to have vanished without a trace, chances are it was carried off by a bobcat, fox or coyote… or by a hawk or owl.

Each of these predators prefers to carry off their prey versus kill and eat it in situ.

Years ago, our Buff Orpington girl, Buttercup, disappeared without a trace. My husband and I hadn't mowed recently, however. I managed to track a trail of disturbed tall grass into the woods and right up to a fox's den dug out under a fallen tree.

Sure enough, Buttercup's legs were sticking out of the entrance. The fox was nowhere in sight, so we retrieved our poor girl and gave her a proper burial. If your chicken has seemingly disappeared, she may have been the victim of a predator.

DON'T GIVE UP IF YOUR CHICKEN GOES MISSING

If your headcount is off at lock-up or any other time and you've exhausted the steps outlined here, don't give up hope just yet. Call your neighbors and ask them to keep an eye open for your missing bird. (Our Henrietta once decided to relocate herself to the grassy backyard of neighbors about a half mile to the north.)

Carefully check your road for signs of a chicken unsuccessfully trying to cross a road. Inspect your garage, garden shed and any other structure on your property and on your neighbors' property, too. If you belong to a local poultry group, put out the word — and share a photo, if you have one — that your chicken is missing. The more people searching, the more chances you'll find your bird.

Margie Orpington had not returned by morning release time on Monday, and an all-out search for her by my sons and I yielded no clue as to where our errant chicken might be. The road out front and our other coops out back are clear, as are our garage, pole barn, and the forests around our property.

None of our neighbors have seen our missing chicken. So I can only hope that Margie is alive and will eventually find his way home.

Ana Hotaling and her husband, Jae, own FMA Farms, a heritage-poultry farm in southeast Michigan. Follow her adventures at www.facebook.com/FMAFarms.

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Respiratory Infections

A 2023 study in *Poultry Science* states that respiratory infections are the leading source of financial losses in large poultry houses. In backyard flocks, they're just as worrisome and fairly common. They can range in severity, from very mild with 0% mortality to incredibly severe with near 100% mortality.

The cold, damp days of winter are the perfect breeding ground for these infections to spread. The good news is that with good management and some herbal allies, you can help reduce the risk for your flock.

The cold, damp days of winter can lead to respiratory illnesses in your flock if you're not careful.

SYMPTOMS

If there's one silver lining to respiratory infections, it's that they're usually easy to identify. Symptoms will vary depending on what's causing the respiratory infection, but be on the lookout for:

- coughing
- diarrhea
- drop in egg production
- eye or nasal discharge
- facial swelling
- head shaking
- lethargy/quickly tiring
- open-mouthed breathing
- rattling sound when breathing
- sneezing
- stretching neck out

On top of this, your chickens can fall severely ill if they're also dealing with a secondary condition or infection, such as egg yolk peritonitis or internal parasites.

CAUSES

Chickens can develop a respiratory infection from a variety of different sources, including:

- bacteria
- dirty coops
- fungal infections
- parasitic infections
- viruses

Although there are countless bacteria, viruses, parasites and fungi that can cause illness in your chickens, a handful are fairly common.

INFECTIOUS BRONCHITIS: This is a highly contagious viral disease, caused by the infectious bronchitis virus, that affects the respiratory and reproductive systems of chickens. Once one bird is infected, the entire flock will be infected within 24 to 48 hours.

AVIAN INFLUENZA: Also known as bird flu or AI, avian influenza can either be high pathogenicity (HPAI) or low pathogenicity (LPAI). While both HPAI and LPAI can cause respiratory symptoms in chickens, they're more often seen in LPAI outbreaks.

MYCOPLASMA GALLISEPTICUM: This bacterium is a very common cause of respiratory disease in chickens. Mycoplasma infections can

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lead to chronic respiratory issues. This virus can stay dormant for months and then manifest suddenly during times of stress.

INFECTIOUS CORYZA: Infectious coryza is caused by the *Haemophilus paragallinarum* bacteria. Mortality is generally low; however, illness can cause severe symptoms in young and old birds.

PREVENTION TIPS

Respiratory infections are real threats to backyard flocks. However, several things you can do can lower the risk and prevent infection from developing.

KEEP THE COOP CLEAN: Maintaining a clean coop is essential for your flock's respiratory health, particularly in winter. Dirty coops have a higher concentration of particulate matter (PM) that float around through the air, and these particulates can negatively impact your chicken's health once inhaled.

A 2023 study in *Poultry Science Journal* ("Particulate matter in poultry house on poultry respiratory disease …") states that PMs cause respiratory infection in one of three ways: "Inhaled PM irritates the respiratory tract, decreases immune resistance, and causes respiratory disease; respiratory tract irritation by compounds present in PM; and infections with pathogenic and nonpathogenic microorganisms attached to PM. The latter two modes of influence are more harmful."

High ammonia levels, which occur when waste builds up in a coop, also causes problems for our birds. A 2024 study in the journal *Gene* ("Identification and functional analysis of circular RNA expression profiles associated with ammonia exposure in chicken lungs") found that elevated ammonia levels can actually cause damage to the lungs, making them more vulnerable to infection and disease.

The question of how often to clean the coop is highly subjective. I clean my coop once per week, and that works well for my flock. But I also know chicken-keepers that go in daily to remove waste, and others that clean every couple of weeks.

The answer to how often you should clean your coop depends entirely on the number of birds you have and the size of your coop. As a rule of thumb, if you walk in and smell ammonia, it's past time to clean.

SUPPORT THE IMMUNE SYSTEM: Anything you can do to strengthen your chicken's immune system is going to help stave off respiratory infections during the winter months.

Respiratory signs can include rales (fine crackles), snicking (sneezing), watery eyes, fluid or mucus from nostrils and coughing.

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Disease-free stock, properly ventilated housing and appropriate biosecurity measures play important roles in maintaining a healthy flock.

One of easiest ways to do this is to add fresh garlic cloves to your chicken's water. Garlic has been used for centuries as a natural antibacterial, and there are countless studies that support its use as an antibacterial, antiviral, antiparasitic, and antifungal.

For example, a 2019 study in the *Journal of Herbmed Pharmacology* ("In Ovo evaluation of antiviral effects of aqueous garlic [*Allium sativum*] extract against a velogenic strain of Newcastle disease virus") found that garlic was an effective pretreatment for Newcastle disease. This disease causes severe respiratory infections in poultry. Although the United States is mostly free from Newcastle, it's endemic in many parts of the world.

To give your chickens the benefits of garlic, you can put it right in their water. A good ratio is two cloves, roughly chopped, per gallon. Change them out every couple of days.

Another easy way to support your chicken's immune system is with oregano. I use oregano oil with my chickens because of its potency, but dried oregano works just fine too!

A 2022 study in the *Journal of Food Measurement and Characterization* ("Antibacterial characteristics of oregano essential oil …") looked at oregano oil's effects on E. coli. Researchers found that oregano

Add dried hibiscus and mint to your chickens' water to help with heat stress in summer and to boost their immune systems in winter.

> **The cold, damp days of winter** are the perfect breeding ground for these infections to spread.

oil caused damage to E. coli's cellular structures, and the conclusion was that oregano oil can be considered a natural antibacterial agent.

There are many brands of oregano oil online and, like everything else, some brands make a quality product and others don't. I've used North American Spice for years, and it's a potent, quality product.

To use oregano oil with your chickens simply put 1 drop per gallon into their water and stir well.

Finally, try adding dried hibiscus to your chicken's water. Hibiscus is high in vitamin C, which helps strengthen the immune system. And it might help them recover faster if they do get sick. A 2023 study in *Annals of Nutrition and Metabolism* ("Immune-enhancing role of vitamin C and zinc and effect on clinical conditions") states that vitamin C can help shorten the duration of respiratory infection, in addition to boosting the immune system.

Dried hibiscus makes a wonderfully tart tea, and my chickens love the taste. Add the dried petals right to their water, starting with one tablespoon per gallon, and let it soak in there. You can also brew a hot hibiscus tea, let cool and add it to your chicken's water. ◆

Author Heather Levin is an educator, herbalist and chicken wrangler of 30-plus chickens. She's also the founder of The Backyard Chickens Summit and Chicken Health Academy, a pioneering online learning academy that teaches natural and emergency chicken-care strategies. You can find out more about her program online at www.chickenhealthacademy.com.

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MOBILE OPERATIONS

Pastured poultry is a breeze when you have a coop on the move.

ARTICLE & PHOTOS BY DAVID SCHAFER

How empowered I felt holding my copy of Joel Salatin's first writing effort, *The Pastured Poultry Manual*, hot off the press in 1991! I could finally confidently build a chicken shelter and supply my grass-fed beef and lamb customers with the pastured poultry they'd been clamoring for.

The build was not difficult with Salatin's clear plans, but try as I might, I could only scrounge up a few sheets of used scrap aluminum. And buying new wasn't even a consideration! So I used heavier metal for the most of the roofs and back sides on all eight pens. In so doing, I ensured that the moving chore was mine and mine alone. Even though they were only 2-feet tall, they were very heavy.

That was my start, and like everything that a city-kid-turned-farmer learns, it was just a bit painful. But it was also very fruitful! Pastured poultry sold like hot cakes down at the Kansas City River Market and quickly increased my customer base fourfold! I was sold on chicken, and after taking my licks selling crops and cattle, I loved being a price maker instead of a price taker.

THE NEXT STEP

After trudging along with my heavy tractor load much longer than reasonable or intelligent, a farm move prompted a rethink. Considering more about weight than longevity, I liked Tim Shell's 20-by-40-foot PVC layer shelter and made one for broilers, housing 500 at a time, brooder to harvest, and loved it. That concept took us to the next step. A few years and a few chicken-coop-kite stories later, Featherman Equipment made the first chicken tractor commercially available for sale to the public, a metal greenhouse on skids we dubbed the Prairie Schooner.

Many models like the Prairie Schooner are now on the market. This has helped scale pastured poultry from the hundreds to the thousands per farm. But, like the Schooner, all models require a tractor or truck to move them, jeopardizing a bit of the land-care goal.

In support of better land and animal care (including the human in charge), John Suscovich published *Stress-Free Chicken Tractor Plans* in 2015, launching another wave of do-it-yourself, manually pulled, shelters with the key difference of being tall enough to allow a person to walk into them.

A BIG BREAKTHROUGH

Leaping from the Suscovich success, the next big breakthrough came in a coop of aluminum framing allowing the space of a Salatin pen and the height of a Suscovich tractor, yet still manually moved (requires a pretty stout man). The AlumiCoop featured rectangular aluminum tubing in full length pieces.

In June 2024 Featherman Equipment added the Chicken Ship, a laser-cut aluminum coop that is ultralight and breaks down to small pieces making it shippable door-to-door. The Chicken Ship is light enough that a single person can scale and never have to start a tractor or drive a truck onto a wet pasture.

Yet another brilliant scaling innovation is the Three Brother's Farm's Hen Pen, featuring a trailing netting system which, in conjunction with the Prairie Schooner, allows 2,800 hens to be moved in just 13 minutes. Plans for building a Hen Pen are available for purchase here: www.3brothersfarmwi.com/henpen.

Perdue Farms developed a self-propelled, 6,000-bird coop to capitalize on the market created by small pastured-poultry farmers. With a five-week-per-batch pasture grow-out, 60,000 chickens can be raised per mobile coop per year. But that's only .0086% of the 700 million chickens Perdue raises in a year! It will be interesting to see where Perdue goes with this.

In the same vein from Jefferson, Texas, engineer-turned-pastured-poultry-enthusiast Matt Cadman has created a self-propelled, geeked-out, giant small-scale tractor, the SuperCoop, as well as a self-propelled net pasture he calls "Frank" (short for Frankenstein).

Mobile coops are on the move. They certainly are working for broilers and layers for small farmers, and the commercial poultry mobile experiment bears watching closely. Many of the one million new Homestead layer flocks established in the early 2020s are converting to mobile coops to enjoy the benefits of the fresh daily salad bar and precision manure placement. Chickens are definitely on the run!

To learn about pastured layers and broilers, visit the American Pastured Poultry Producer's Association website: https://apppa.org.

David Schafer founded Featherman Equipment (www.feathermanequipment.com) and is a past president of the American Pastured Poultry Producer's Association. He raises poultry and goats in central Florida, developing new products for growers.

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BABY BLUNDERS

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Avoid these mistakes before you bring home new chicks.

BY ERIN SNYDER

Deciding to add chickens to your backyard is fun and exciting. However, it can quickly become a disaster if you don't have an adequate plan. Before you bring home some adorable baby chicks, check out these tips to make your chick-raising a success.

LEGAL MATTERS

MISTAKE: *failing to check with your municipality before purchasing chickens*

SOLUTION: Before acquiring chicks, check with your local municipality to see if owning chickens is legal in your neighborhood. If you can legally own chickens, are there any other restrictions, such as where to place the coop and run or if you need a permit to construct the coop in your backyard? Knowing all the legal requirements may save you a lot of hard work and heartbreak.

Another legal consideration is whether you can keep a rooster. Many towns and urban areas that allow hens do not allow roosters in backyard flocks. Have a plan in case you accidentally receive a rooster, such as re-homing or butchering.

UNDERESTIMATING COSTS

MISTAKE: *thinking that chickens don't cost a lot of money.*

SOLUTION: Don't do a quick internet search. Talk to your local feed-supply store owners about feed costs, and shop around for chicken coops to get an estimate of actual costs. First-time chicken-keepers can frequently overlook the cost since the price for each chick is relatively low. However, the actual cost of the chicks is just the beginning. Feed, feeders, water founts, the coop and run, and other chicken-raising expenses can add up quickly.

A common myth among potential chicken-keepers is that the money saved on the grocery bill from no longer having to buy eggs will more than cover the feed and other costs. No matter how ideal it may sound on paper, you will only save money if you run an extremely cost-effective egg business.

Another cost to bear in mind is vet care. Even if you don't plan on raising chickens for pets, there is still a chance that one or more of your hens may need veterinarian assistance. An emergency vet care fund in your budget will allow you to treat your flock when problems arise.

ERIN SNYDER

Don't fail to protect your chicks from predators, including predator-proofing the brooder, coop and run, and supervise free-range time.

STRAIGHT-RUN WOES

MISTAKE: *purchasing straight-run chicks versus pullets*

SOLUTION: Purchase sexed pullets. Chicks are available to purchase in three different ways: straight run (an unsexed mixture of males and females), sexed females (usually referred to as pullets) and sexed males (called cockerels).

Cockerels are usually the least expensive, while pullets are the costliest. Straight-run chicks fall somewhere between cockerels and pullets. It might be tempting to cut costs and purchase straight-run chicks, but that is only the best plan if you plan to butcher the cockerels and keep the hens for laying purposes.

Straight-run orders consist of at least 50% roosters, not because hatcheries send unwanted cockerels in straight-run orders but because even when hatched under a hen, cockerels always outnumber pullets. So, if your sole purpose is to raise a flock of layers, spend more money for sexed pullets, as cockerels will more than make up for the money saved in the feed you raised for chickens you need to re-home.

SICKLY CHICKS

MISTAKE: *failing to purchase chicks from a reputable source*

SOLUTION: Purchase chicks through a hatchery or feed-supply store. When owning chickens, deciding where to purchase chicks is one of the most critical and often overlooked decisions. Buying chicks from a reputable hatchery that supports the National Poultry Improvement Plan (NPIP) is the best way to ensure you receive healthy chicks.

You can also order chicks with your local feed mill, as many feed-supply stores and mills order chicks each spring. Be sure to enquire

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If the brooder is too cold, chicks will huddle together to keep warm. You'll need to increase the temperature.

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A common myth among potential chicken-keepers is that the **money saved on the grocery bill from no longer having to buy eggs will more than cover the feed and other costs.**

about placing the order in early winter, as feed stores order early to ensure the chicks arrive in the spring. Another good idea is to enquire about the hatchery from which the feed-supply store purchases the chicks so you can research the hatchery. Remember, not all hatcheries are created equal, so read online reviews to see if customers are receiving healthy chicks.

Never purchase chicks from home and garden centers, rural lifestyle retailers or Craigslist to ensure you receive healthy ones.

WRONG BREEDS

MISTAKE: *failing to research the breed's purpose or personality*

SOLUTION: Research each breed before purchasing. With so many eye-catching chicken breeds, it's easy to see how many first-time chicken owners become overwhelmed by the options. However, purchasing Orpingtons over Golden Comets isn't the best option if you're raising chickens to sell eggs. Still, if you are raising chickens for all-purpose pets who lay some eggs, either of these breeds may be the perfect fit for your family.

Other things to consider before choosing a breed(s) for your flock include meat production, heat or cold hardiness, free range or confinement tolerance, and egg color.

TOO MANY CHICKS

MISTAKE: *ordering too many chicks for the novice chicken-keeper*

SOLUTION: Start slowly. It's easy to dive into a new hobby headfirst, and chickens are no exception. But, if you are new to chickens or it's been a few years since you have had some, it's best to start slowly.

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Improper Heat Levels

MISTAKE: *failing to recognize signs of cold or hot chicks*

SOLUTION: Watch the chicks to ensure they're comfortable with the heat source. Preventing them from becoming too hot or cold is essential for proper growth and survival.

Providing chicks with a heat lamp or good-quality brooder heating plate is the best way to ensure chicks stay snug and warm. While chicks must stay warm, ensuring they aren't too hot is equally essential.

Chicks can't regulate their body temperatures and quickly become overheated, leading to death. To prevent chicks from overheating, provide some getaway spots in the brooder where the heat isn't as intense.

For best results, use a good-quality brooder heating plate where chicks can go under when cold and come out again after warming up.

Chilly Chicks

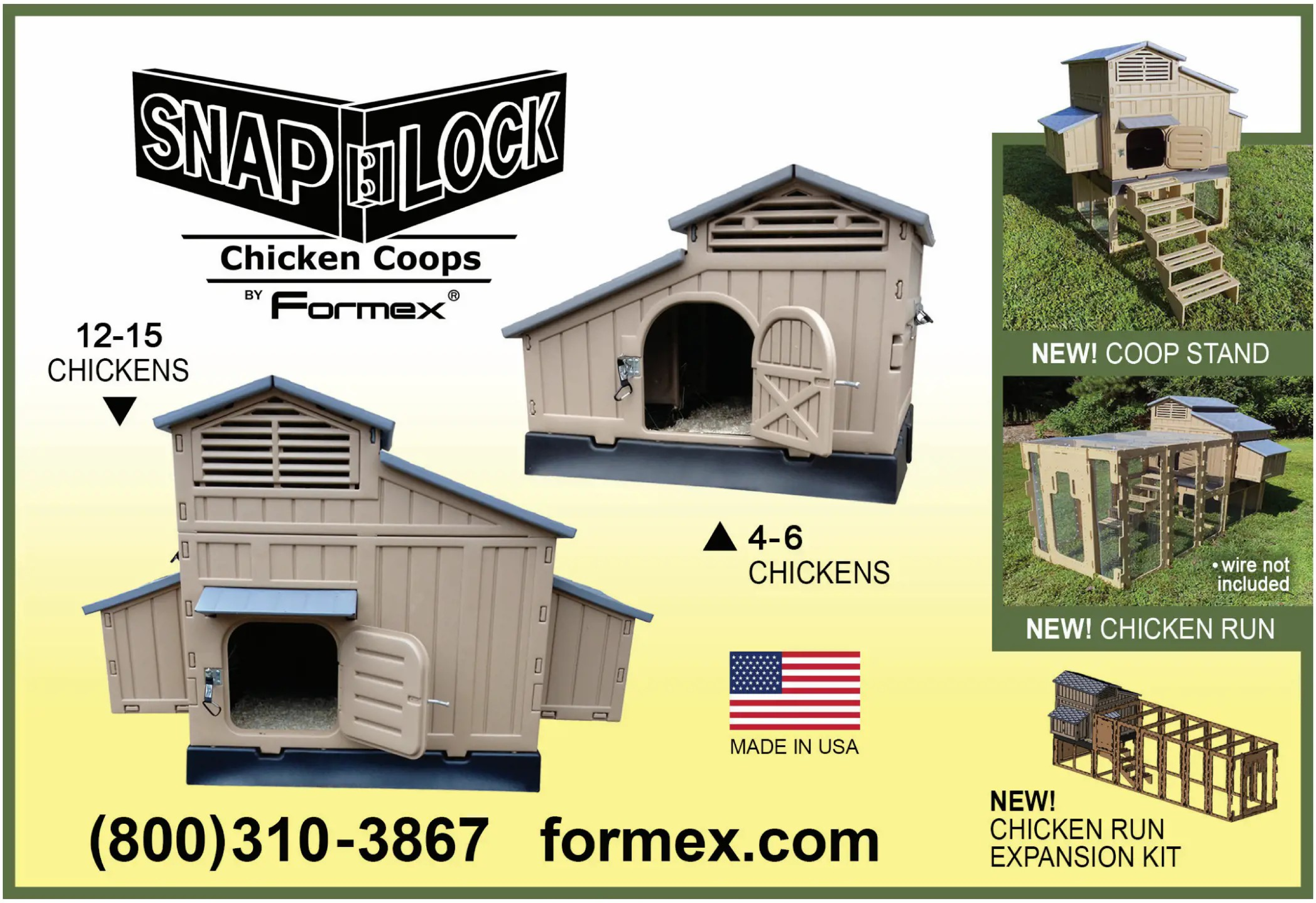
WARNING SIGNS: Chicks refusing to leave the heat source, piling on top of each other, and trying to keep warm (this behavior often leads to suffocation in chicks at the bottom of the pile).

SOLUTION: Lower the heat source to provide more heat.

Hot Chicks

WARNING SIGNS: Chicks that are too warm will hold their wings out from their bodies, rest their heads on the ground, and pant. If you notice this behavior, immediately move the chick(s) away from the heat source until they perk up again. Raise the heat source a little at a time and check chicks frequently until everyone seems comfortable.

SOLUTION: Many chicken experts also suggest hanging a thermometer in the brooder to ensure it stays a cozy 95 degrees Fahrenheit for the first week. (The temperature should be reduced by 5 degrees per week until chicks are fully feathered at 8 weeks of age.)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Feed chicks a starter or start-and-grow feed.

There is no perfect number to start with (although many hatcheries have a three-chick minimum), but starting with a few chicks will help you gain experience without feeling overwhelmed. Usually, three to six chicks are a good number to begin with before growing your flock in a year or two.

UNSAFE BROODER

MISTAKE: *failing to provide a safe brooder*

SOLUTION: Provide a chick-safe brooder that chicks can't escape and pets can't access. Sadly, many chicks die due to an inadequate brooder. This usually happens when brooders are constructed from cardboard boxes or kiddie pools. Chicks can either jump out of these enclosures away from the heat source and freeze to death or be snatched up by a curious pet.

To keep everyone safe, choose a safe brooder, such as a dog crate covered (including the top) with ½-inch hardware cloth to keep chicks in and pets out. Or, if using a cardboard box, construct a "lid" out of some small boards and ½-inch hardware cloth. Puppy soft-sided exercise playpens also work well for brooders.

OVERCROWDING

MISTAKE: *housing too many chicks in too small of an area*

SOLUTION: Provide enough room for chicks to move about freely without the need to trample each other. Overcrowding your flock is one of the most common practices among backyard flock owners. Overcrowded conditions are inhumane and can lead to disease, internal and external parasites, stress, bullying, and, in extreme cases, cannibalism.

The best way to prevent overcrowding is to ensure enough space for each flock member (at least 2 square feet per chick and 15 square feet minimum for each standard chicken, although more is better). Only purchase chicks that comfortably fit into your brooder or henhouse. Failing to do so will lead to health and behavior issues in the flock that could otherwise be avoided. Keep your chicks happy and never overcrowd.

IMPROPER NUTRITION

MISTAKE: *failing to feed good-quality feed specific to chicks*

SOLUTION: Feed high-quality chick feed. Chicks need a specially formulated feed, often called "starter" or "start-and-grow." It's critical that you choose a chick feed to fit your flock's specific needs to help them get the best start in life. Whether you raise your chicks for layers or broilers will help determine which feed to choose, as broilers and laying hens (often referred to as "replacement hens" on feedbag tags) have different dietary needs.

Whatever feed you choose to feed chicks, read the feed bag tag and follow the directions carefully for the best results. If you're still

BARILLO_PICTUREBY BARILLO_PICTURE/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

Thinking about getting new chicks can cause math issues. Be sure to get the appropriate amount that you can handle. Don't fall victim to chicken math.

unsure what food to feed chicks, talk to your local feed mill about choosing the best option.

PREDATORS

MISTAKE: *failing to protect chicks from predators, including predator-proofing the brooder, coop, and run*

SOLUTION: Completely predator-proof the brooder, coop and run.

Chicks usually start life in the house, where it is snug and warm, and they have adequate protection from predators. However, if you have household pets, you must have physical barriers so other pets can't harm them. Dogs, cats, ferrets, rats and snakes all prey on chicks, so leave no gaps larger than ½ inch in the brooder.

Before moving chicks outdoors, predator-proof the chicken coop and run thoroughly. Cover the run sides, roof and coop windows with a ½-inch, 16-gauge hardware cloth and attach predator skirts to deter digging. Do not leave any gaps bigger than ½ inch in either your coop or run. The poultry coop should have a wooden or cement floor for extra protection.

PLANNING TOO SMALL

MISTAKE: *going into chicken-keeping without a plan.*

SOLUTION: Planning your dream flock: Before acquiring chicks or purchasing your new coop, take some time to dream about your perfect flock. Do you want to keep it small with only a few pet hens, raise show birds, or sell eggs in the future?

Deciding these things before you embark on your adventure will help you determine what size coop and run will work best for your future flock, prevent you from purchasing a larger coop in the future, and avoid an overcrowded one.

By planning and knowing common mistakes, you can prevent problems from arising and enjoy those precious chick days. ◆

Erin Snyder and her family have raised chickens and ducks for nearly two decades. She is passionate about all things poultry but especially poultry nutrition, predator protection, egg-laying disorders and helping chickens live their best lives. Follow her chicken adventures on her newly hatched Instagram page: www.instagram.com/thehenhousehygge.

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wing tip

Chickens can **get bored during winter**, and that could mean trouble.

The colder weeks of late autumn and the frigid winter months can be particularly difficult for backyard flocks. Daylight hours are few. Frigid temperatures, cold rain, snow, ice and shiver-producing winds can mean more time spent in the limited space of the coop. Sometimes, chickens will remain indoors even when offered an opportunity to be outside, which can lead to boredom.

Boredom — not enough to do and close quarters — can cause unwanted behaviors. As late autumn winds usher in colder temperatures, chicken-keepers must be observant because behaviors such as bullying, feather-pecking and egg-eating can become lasting habits. When you notice any of these behaviors, it might be time to change things up a bit, so consider experimenting with some of the following stimulating options for cooped-up winter birds.

GARDEN EXERCISE

If your hens already have access to periods of free-ranging, open the gates to your compost pile or dormant vegetable garden as a way to combat boredom. These are great new places for your hens to explore, scratch, scrape and dig. While they till your garden, they also engage in behaviors that come naturally.

When I give my hens an opportunity to venture inside the fenced vegetable garden area, they run to the gate. This limited access is a welcome opportunity to be in a different part of the yard. If there's no snow on the ground and the ground isn't too frozen, I have found this to be an excellent option.

"Many chicken owners allow their chickens full access to the garden all winter long," says author and chicken-keeper Jessi Bloom in *Free-Range Chicken Gardens*. "In this season, there are few delicate plants in the garden, and there are insects to eat and soil to scratch in. Because of freezing temperatures, make sure the chickens always have access to fresh water and housing to protect them from the cold."

COMPETITIVE EATING

Take the boredom out of chow time: Winter food treats can add nutrition and play simultaneously. Your hens will find the following treats a nutritious addition to their daily portion of layer feed. Cabbage, kale, collards or other leafy greens can be suspended with a piece of rope. Hanging this treat means it will swing when pecked — providing movement, stimulation and something green to consume when grass and yard greens aren't available.

Homemade or commercial suet cakes are a perfect source of extra winter nutrition. Recipes abound for making your own chicken cakes or suet mixes that can give your girls a variety of nutrients and be available in forms that allow them to engage in their own natural feeding behaviors. Hung from the sides of a pen or suspended from the ceiling, suet mixes with different grains are other options.

Offer warm snacks, such as oatmeal or rice, to hens in the late afternoon. Not only do these give the girls a treat, they can provide a boost of warmth when the weather is cold. Hens gobble up these offerings before being closed in their coop for the night.

During summer, free-ranging hens find plenty of protein in foraging the backyard for worms and insects. Protein treats are a winter bonus that can be particularly helpful to molting birds. Hens relish protein-filled surprises, such as mealworms, shredded cheese, hard-boiled eggs (smashed up so was not to inspire egg-eating) and fish. Canned cat food is a good source of inexpensive fish that gives a protein boost on bitterly cold days.

OBSTACLES, OF COURSE

Varying the dynamics of the yard breaks up boredom in that it allows individuals to gain more space for moving about. Perch additions are one way to give your birds new territory inside the hen yard. Add perches at different heights so birds can hop up and take in the winter view of the yard. Perches can be created from branches, sticks or logs placed on end.

Offering additional space in the hen yard that is sheltered will let your girls move about while staying out of the wind and weather. Your choice of additions don't have to be costly; even leaving a rake in the run will give your girls something new to think about.

Note: A muddy yard with standing water isn't healthy for chickens. Standing water will become contaminated with feces, and chickens will drink from it regardless of its condition. It's easy for even the smallest flock to churn a yard into a muddy mess — so using straw also has the benefit of soaking up moisture. Remove wet straw, and replace it with fresh material or fill in wet ruts with soil to help keep birds' feet dry.

IN THE MAIL

The United States Postal Service has been safely delivering boxes of day-old baby chicks and other poultry to customers since 1918.

BY DOUG OTTINGER

STEPHANIE FREY/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

Shortly before a baby chicks hatches, the egg yolk is absorbed into the developing abdomen of the little bird. This supplies it with enough nutrition to survive for up to 72 hours without any additional feed or water. Newly hatched turkeys, pheasants, ducks and geese also have this unique adaptation. Because of this, several million baby chicks are safely shipped every year, via the United States Postal Service, to locations across the continental United States.

If you are a veteran poultry-keeper, you may have ordered day-old chicks, or other fowl from a hatchery, and had them shipped to your local post office. For many, there is hardly anything more exciting than receiving a much-anticipated, early-morning phone call from the local post office, letting them know a box of baby chicks has safely arrived.

Have you ever wondered how the Postal Service can safely ship a box of baby poultry, across the United States, in less than 72 hours? There is a well-designed system in place that allows this to happen. As a part of our national infrastructure, postal regulations are in place that make the routine shipping of day-old baby poultry possible day after day, year after year. Let's take a look at the operation, starting with a brief history of chick shipping in the U.S.

A HISTORY OF CHICK SHIPPING

The Postal Service began handling and shipping poultry in 1918. More than 100 years later, millions of day-old chicks and other poultry are still being shipped annually. For many years, the post office transported boxes of day-old birds on regional routes in their own trucks. The orders were also carried in the mail cars of trains. Hatcheries were usually smaller at the time but were regional and greater in number. They often supplied geographically-close markets.

While your birds are in transit (above right), make sure you have the brooder set up and ready to go when they arrive (below).

MALSHAK_OFF/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

COURTESY METZER FARMS

Between 1950 and 1960, almost 90% of the nation's small hatcheries went out of business. Changing demographics meant young families were leaving the farm and moving to suburbia. Chicken-keeping, for many, was not part of their lifestyle. Order size also began to decrease. At one point, an average order might have been for 200 Rhode Island Red broilers. New orders might now be for only 25 laying hens. Hatcheries that did survive found themselves facing requests to ship smaller orders of day-old poultry much farther distances.

As shipping distances increased, shipping methods started to change. Thousands of boxes of day-old chicks were soon being transported annually, in the cargo holds of airlines that had contracts to carry the mail. This arrangement worked well for many years, but as shipping volume increased, so did shipping mishaps. Boxes of poultry were sometimes held for prolonged periods in baggage areas, or on tarmacs in extreme heat or cold. They were sometimes fit tightly into the holds of planes with other luggage and cargo, without adequate ventilation. As more refrigerated and frozen items began to be shipped, it was soon learned that baby chicks and dry ice, which releases carbon dioxide gas, don't mix well in enclosed cargo holds. Occasional misrouting also took a toll.

Ground transportation was sometimes just as problematic. Jeff Smith from Cackle Hatchery in Lebanon, Missouri, told me a horror story about a large load of baby chicks that got transported across Kansas, in a contract carrier's uninsulated and unventilated truck,

COURTESY JOHN METZER

A pallet of day-old poultry (far left) is ready for transport in a cargo jet.

Rolling racks, or cages, are being loaded for transit (left).

many years ago. According to Jeff Smith and John Metzer of Metzer Waterfowl, in Gonzales, California, a hatchery often had to call the post office a week in advance, during the 1970s, just to find out which ZIP codes they could ship to the next week. Delays, irregularities and problems with shipping orders became all too common.

By the mid 1990s, the Bird Shippers of America, an industry group consisting of numerous hatchery members, was actively lobbying the Postal Service and Congress for improvements to the system. In November of 2001, legislation to correct some of the problems was signed into law. Additional legislation was passed in the farm bill of 2002. Today, 23 years later, the shipping of day-old poultry is very efficient and reliable, with a routing system that works smoothly for hatcheries, independent small poultry breeders and customers.

HATCHING & SHIPPING TODAY

Postal delivery guidelines require that all day-old poultry arrive at the post office within 24 hours of hatching and that they be delivered to the final destination within 72 hours of hatch. Regulations also require they be shipped Priority Mail or Priority Mail Express. The Postal Service uses a network of ground and air shippers to ensure the birds reach their destination in the quickest possible time. Air shipments are transported by commercial contract carriers that handle live shipments and agree to the required guidelines.

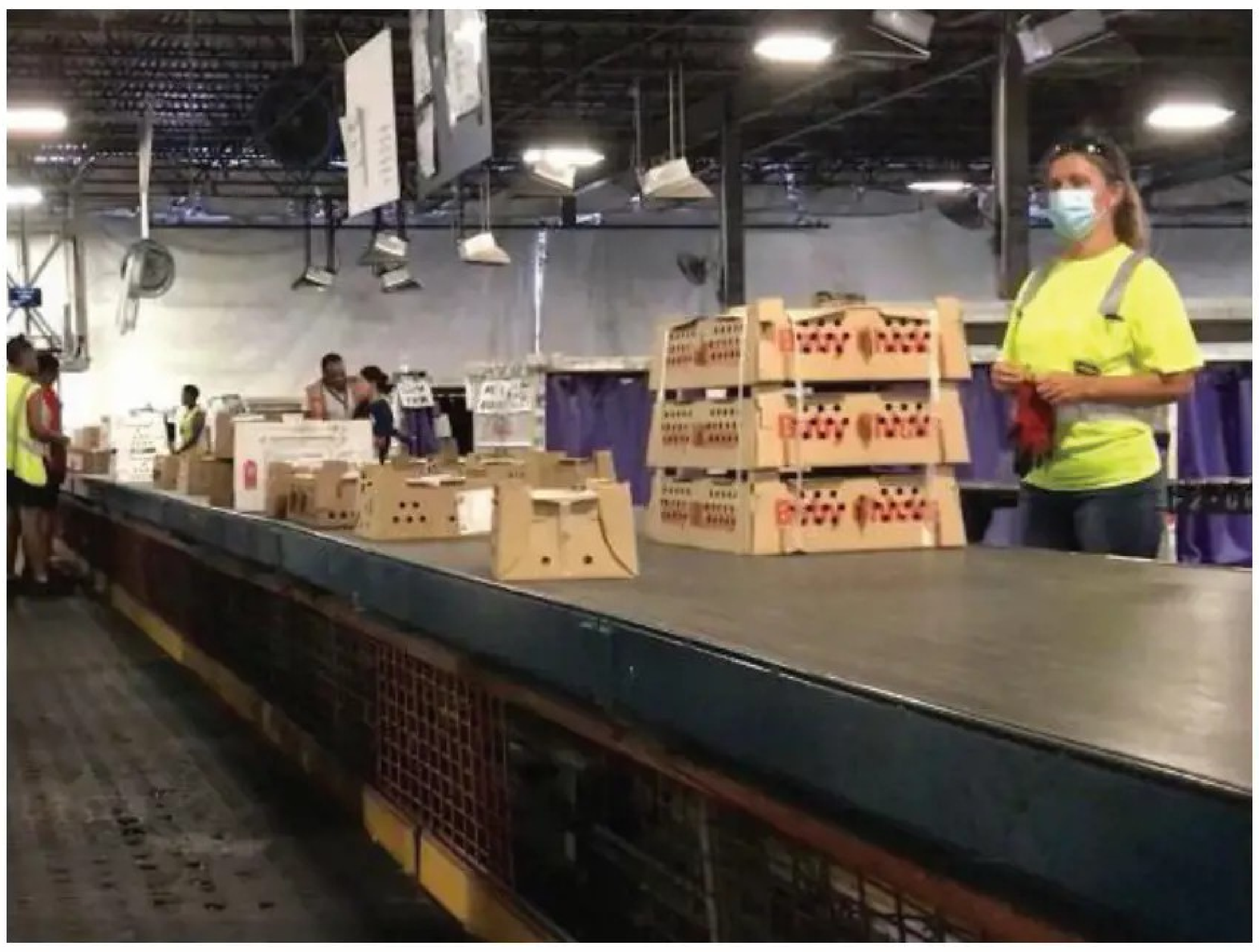
Today, FedEx is the largest live-poultry contract carrier for the Postal Service. With a dedicated live-animal facility at its main hub in Memphis, Tennessee, FedEx handles hundreds of thousands of orders every year. Through this system, most orders arrive at their final destination within 48 hours after hatching.

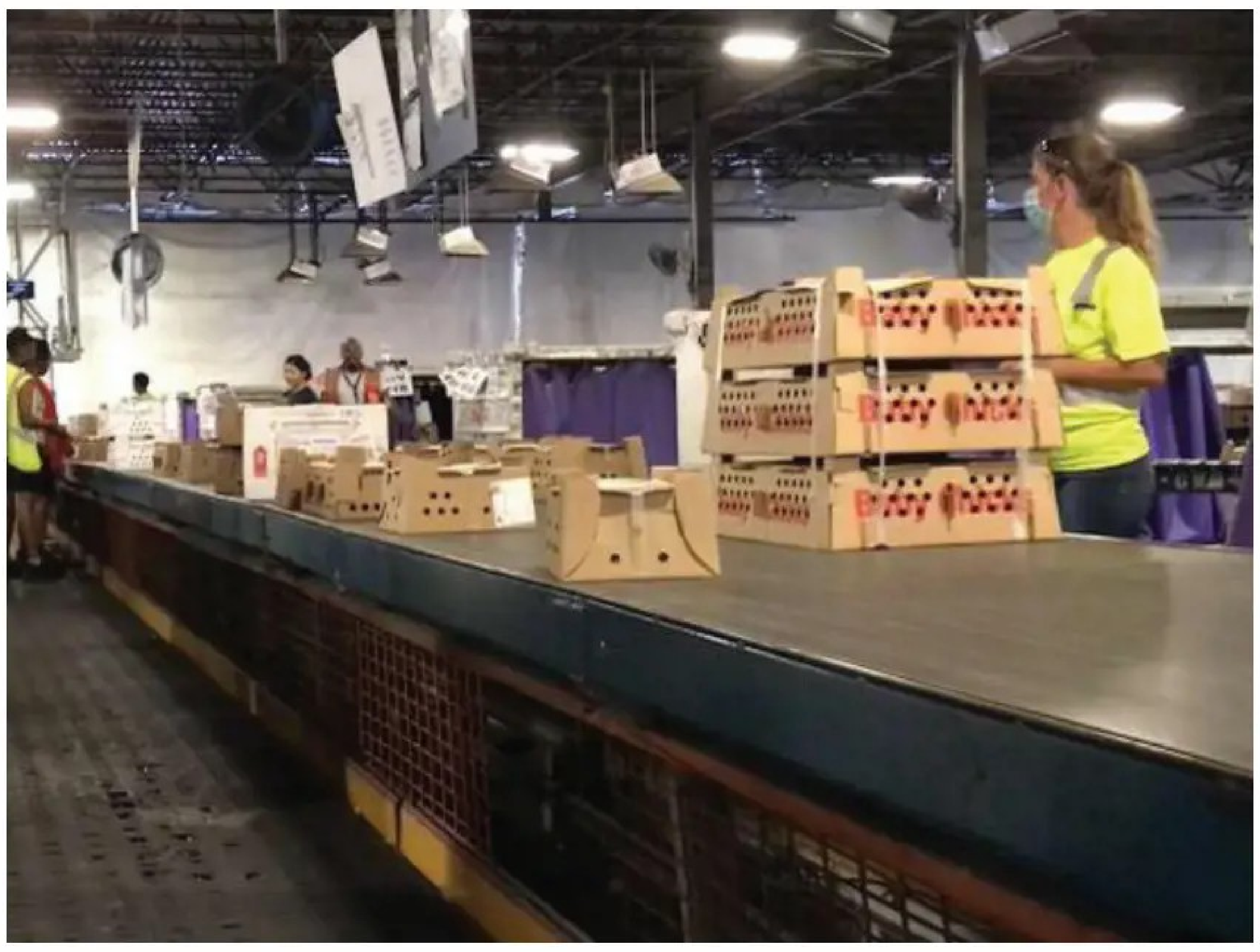
In shipping baby poultry, timing is everything. The entire process starts at the hatchery on the day the eggs are set. Hatcheries want to have all of the different breeds hatch at the same time on hatch day, in so far as possible. By ensuring this, all of the babies can be dry and ready for shipping together.

Even though chicken eggs are supposed to hatch in 21 days, and duck eggs theoretically hatch in 28 days, the reality is that different breeds and strains often have different development times. Hatcheries have incubation times for the different breeds calculated by hours and set the eggs into the incubators accordingly. Marc Metzer, manager of the Metzer Farms hatchery, gave me an example of this: If he is preparing for a Monday morning hatch, Saxony duck eggs must be set Sunday afternoon, 29 days prior to the anticipated hatch date, as they take longer to develop. The eggs from Rouens and most other ducks are set on Monday. Mallard eggs, which normally hatch in about 27 days, aren't placed in the incubators until Tuesday afternoon.

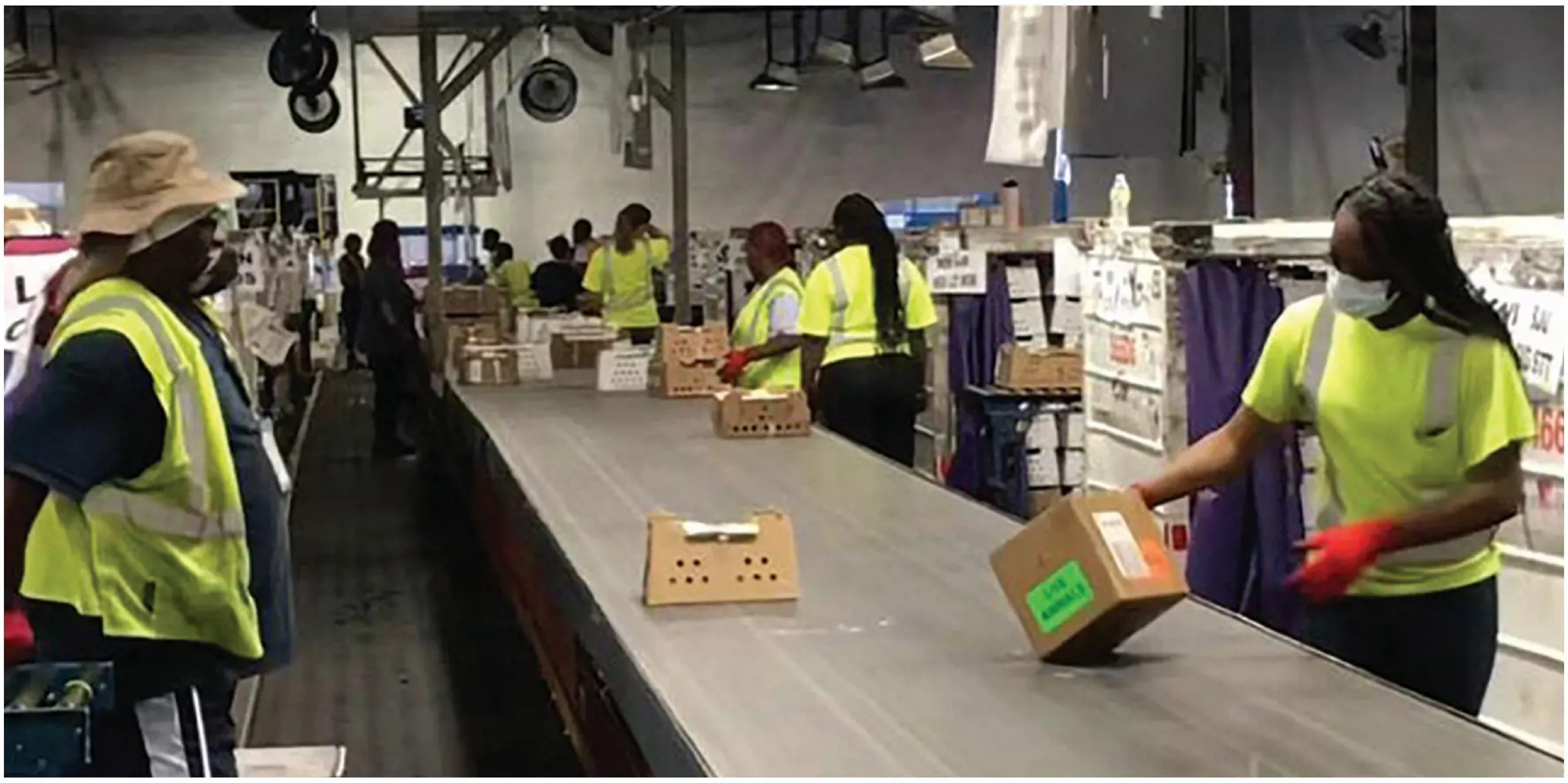
Smith also gave me some examples of how they stagger placement of eggs, from various chicken breeds, into their incubators. Silver Duckwing bantams are known to hatch earlier than some other breeds, often in 20 days. Therefore, these eggs must be set a day later than most other chicken eggs. On the flip side, Cackle's strain of Welsummers, as well as its Buff

Poultry orders are handled at the live animal facility in Memphis, Tennessee.





COURTESY JOHN METZER



Brahma bantams take 22 days to hatch, meaning eggs from these breeds must be set a day earlier than most. By paying close attention to the actual hours it takes for a certain breed to hatch, hatcheries ensure most birds hatch at the same time and are ready for shipping on schedule.

BORN TO FLY

After the baby birds dry, they are placed in individual order boxes, ready to be shipped. Years ago, many hatcheries would not ship less than 25 day-old chicks or other birds in an order. This was to ensure that the babies maintained body warmth. Today, many hatcheries can ship orders of three to five baby fowl, thanks to the development of heating pads that generate warmth and are placed in the bottom of the box on very small orders. Marc Metzer said that many of their orders are for five or less waterfowl. Most poultry-keepers today buy baby poultry as pets.

If you have ever ordered chicks at different times of the year, you may have noticed that they came in different types or styles of boxes. This is just not happenstance. Cackle Hatchery uses three different types of boxes for shipping. The type of bird being shipped, the order size, the anticipated conditions during transit and the weather at the final destination play a big role in the type of box used.

One of the main differences in boxes is the size and type of vent holes on the sides. These vents can range from very small circles on the boxes used during cold weather, to boxes with many large vent holes used in the warmth of summer. Most shipping boxes have sides which angle noticeably inward, instead of being perfectly straight. This design allows fresh air to circulate around and through the boxes as they are stacked together in transit, allowing the baby poultry to breathe.

After orders are filled, the boxes are stacked on upright rolling racks called cages. The cages are placed in insulated and ventilated transport trucks and taken to a regional post office or airport postal facility. During peak season, as many as four truckloads of boxed orders may leave a large hatchery every day.

ALFA27/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

DEPARTURE DIRECTIONS

Orders leaving Cackle Hatchery are taken to nearby Springfield, Missouri, for regional Midwest distribution, or to the airport in Kansas City. Day-old poultry shipped from the Murray McMurray Hatchery in Webster City, Iowa, are taken to the Des Moines airport or transported in hatchery trucks a distance of 180 miles, to the Minneapolis-Saint Paul International Airport, according to Tom Watkins, vice president of McMurray Hatchery. At these airports, the orders are put on specially-designed pallets, placed in cargo jets and sent to the FedEx Live Animal Facility in Memphis, Tennessee, for routing to their final destinations.

Because Metzer Farms' main waterfowl hatchery is in Memphis, it has an advantage that allows them to deliver their newly hatched orders directly to the live animal facility and cut many hours off of the time their birds are in transit. The boxes of day-old poultry remain in the warmth of the facility until they are loaded onto the planes. Day-old poultry is loaded last and taken off first.

Each cargo jet has two cargo decks. The baby poultry get a prime spot on the upper deck, directly behind the cockpit, where temperature control and air circulation is the best. After a final sorting in Memphis, the orders are put on overnight planes and flown to their final destination airports. After landing, they are whisked off to regional postal hubs and then to the local post offices, where they are picked up by the customers. Amazingly, most orders are delivered to the customer within 48 hours, from the time the birds were hatched.

Next time you purchase some new baby poultry, take time to ask them if they were recently on a big adventure. They just might have some amazing stories to tell you about their recent travels!

Doug Ottinger lives in, and writes from, northwest Minnesota. He has 50 years of experience with poultry and holds a bachelor's degree in agriculture, with an emphasis in avian science.

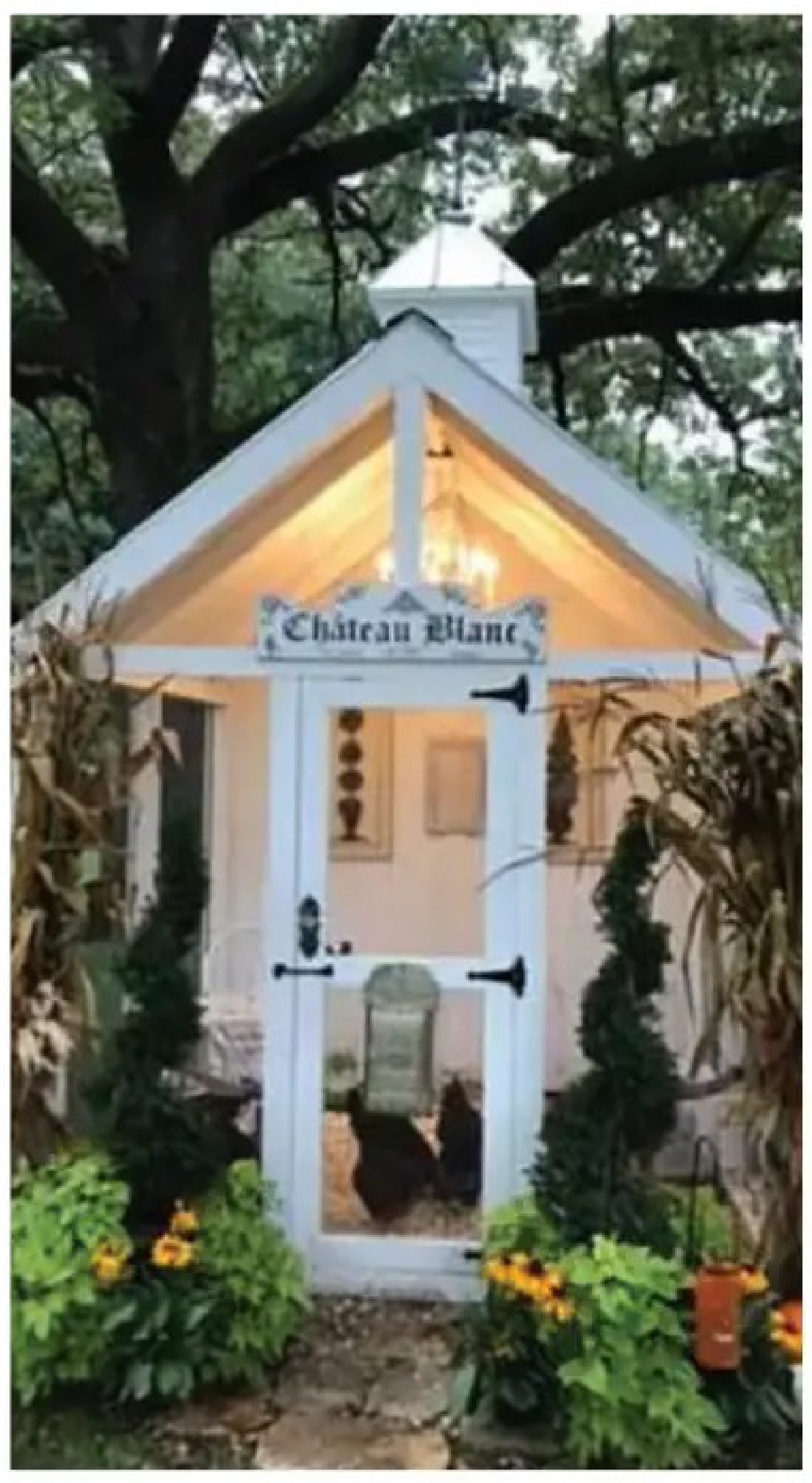
People used to have to order dozens of chicks at a time, as more chicks meant more body heat to survive the trip from hatchery to home. With modern techniques, many hatcheries today will ship as little as three together.

ONE COOL Coop

I have a friend who is a builder by trade. I mentioned to him that I was thinking of getting some hens and a chicken coop. He told me that if I could find some photos of things I wanted in the coop that he would build me one as a wedding present. Well, he did!

I decorate it for the holidays. Most of the decor is from market place or roadside picks. I've been keeping hens for five years, and I love every minute of it!

— Julia Mink, New Boston, Michigan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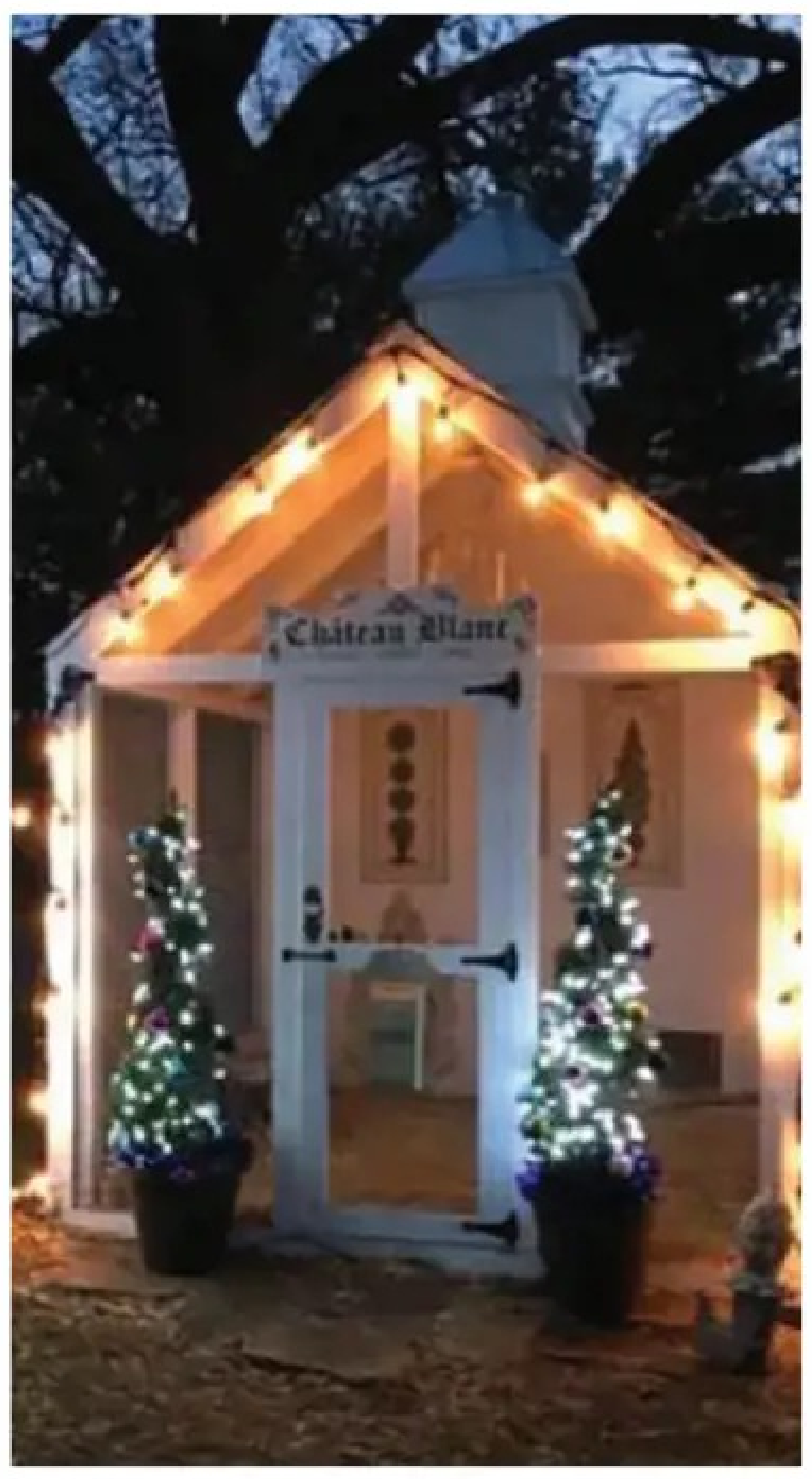
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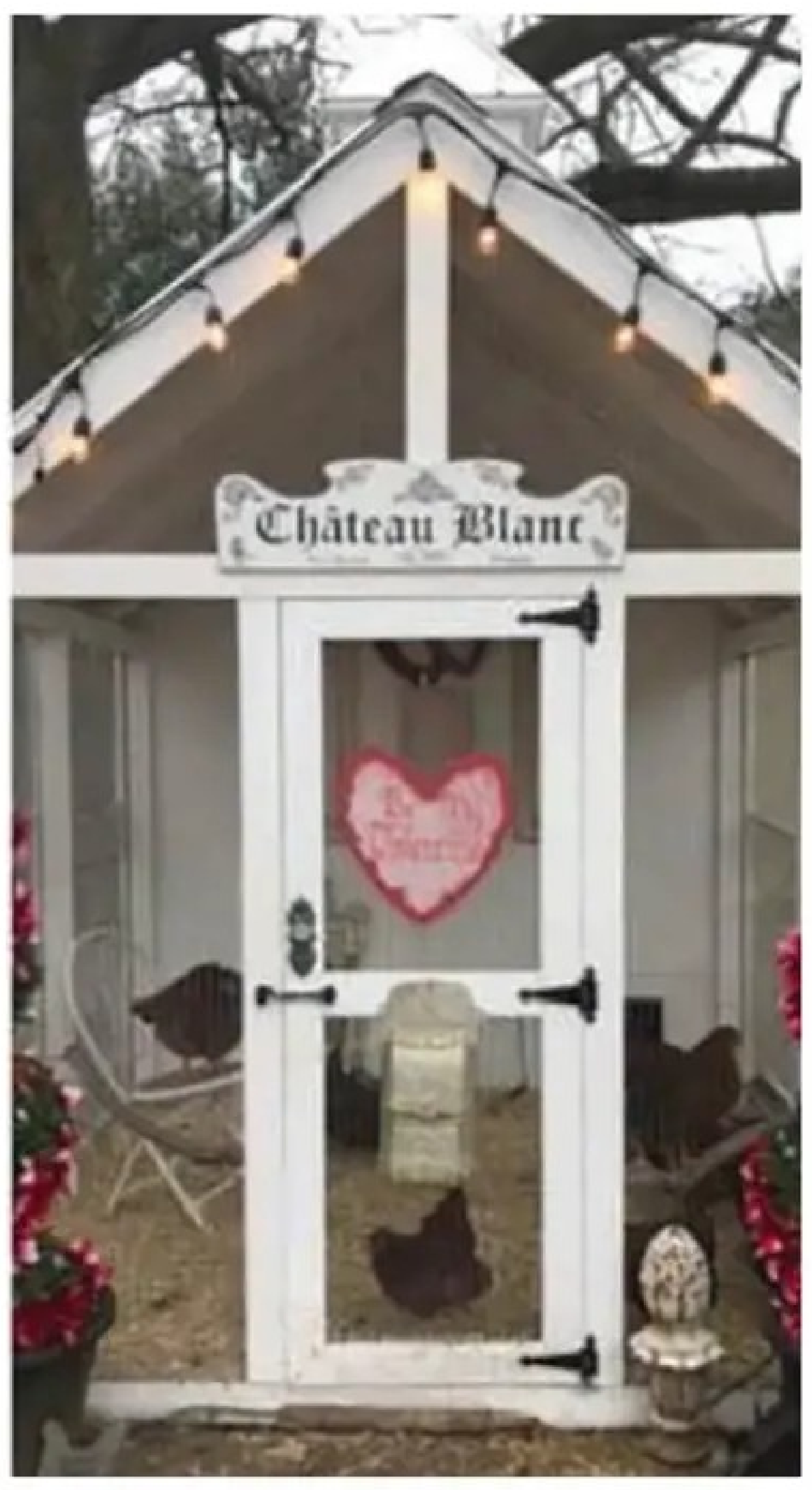
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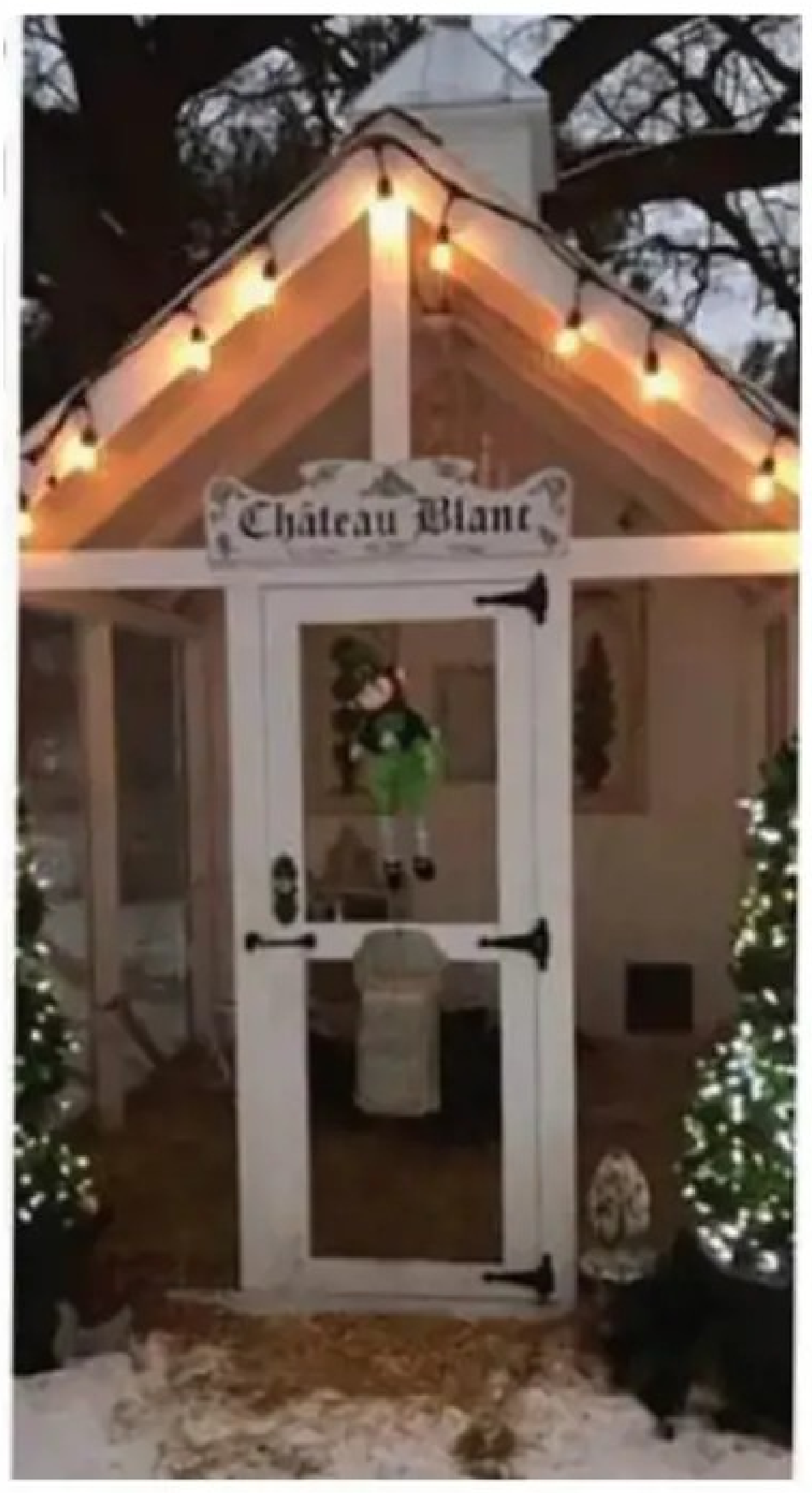
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TELL US ABOUT YOUR COOP!

Email us a short write-up (~250 to 500 words) about your chicken coop along with a few images to **chickens@chickensmagazine.com** with the subject line **One Cool Coop**, and include your name and mailing address.

We'll send one person a prize package of Frenzy Products (total approximate value $60): 30-ounce Mealworm Frenzy, 30-ounce Double Frenzy and Free Range Feast Spice Blend from our sponsor, **Happy Hen Treats** (**www.happyhentreats.com**)!

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FREE RANGE FEAST
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NO PURCHASE NECESSARY TO ENTER. Contest is open to legal residents of the 50 United States or District of Columbia, age 21 or older. Entries must be received between 12:00:01 a.m. PT on 12/25/2024 and 11:59:59 p.m. PT on 2/25/2025. See Official Rules on page 64. Void where prohibited by law. Sponsor: EG Media Investments LLC

Château Blanc

BEYOND THE Egg Salad Sandwich

Sure, egg, mayo, a bit of this and a pinch of that can be perfection, but there are so many more ways to make magic with eggs and bread!

ARTICLE, RECIPES & PHOTOS BY SIGNE LANGFORD

Who doesn't love a really well-constructed egg salad sandwich? Even the old standard of mayo, hardboiled eggs, salt and pepper on white bread can be tasty and satisfying, and everyone has their own way of making what they consider the perfect egg salad sandwich. But there are other ways to enjoy eggs plus bread.

Before we get into it, let's look at some wonderful ways to jazz up that old classic, with additions and tips.

SPREADS & BREADS: Always butter both slices of bread. Butter creates a moisture barrier, preventing the bread from becoming soggy. And — hello! — butter and eggs, is there a better flavor match? On top of the butter layer, go ahead and spread on some flavor: green or corn relish, Dijon mayo or sriracha for the heat-seekers.

From "grocery store" white to artisan sourdough, these are the go-to for sandwiches, but don't forget wraps and pita bread, tortillas and taco shells, English muffins, bagels, burger or hot dog buns, croissants, rice paper wraps, savory scones or biscuits, and even pizza dough.

ADD-INS: Diced celery, chopped pitted olives, diced pickles, capers, finely chopped green onion, diced red pepper or jalapeño, diced cucumber, crisp bacon or diced ham, and of course, the best mayonnaise you can lay your hands on. A Scandinavian trick is to add diced pickled beets, resulting in a pretty pink egg salad. And to moisten the mixture, a drop of pickle juice adds a punch of piquant flavor.

GETTING SPICY: Salt and pepper, naturally, but a pinch of curry, chili flakes, smoked paprika, and a drop or two of Tabasco or another hot sauce take mayo and eggs up a notch. Herbs — chives, cilantro, parsley, tarragon, thyme, dill — add freshness and a ton of flavor.

TOPPINGS: Now that's a prickly subject; some connoisseurs believe adding lettuce, sliced pickles — or heaven forbid, sliced tomato! — is a crime against egg salad. Well, you do you, but we think a leaf or two of something crunchy or peppery — arugula, lettuce, baby spinach, sprouts — is a good thing.

CROQUE AMÉRICAIN

A traditional croque madame is made with mornay sauce and gruyere cheese. In this easier American version, we're skipping the fancy French sauce and using a really old white cheddar instead. It's still incredibly rich and filling and with a little green salad makes a fantastic lunch or dinner.

YIELD: makes two sandwiches

INGREDIENTS

- 4 slices white country bread
- ¼ cup butter; divided
- 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard; divided
- 6 slices Black Forest ham; divided
- 1½ cups grated cheddar cheese; divided
- 2 free-range eggs, fried sunny-side up
- pinch pepper
- pinch coarse sea salt

PREPARATION

Generously butter the outsides of the bread. Arrange them in large skillet or on flattop griddle over medium heat. Preheat broiler to high.

Spread the mustard on one slice of bread for each sandwich, then add ham slices and top with ½ cup cheese for each sandwich, and top with the second slice of bread. Toast in the pan until the bottom is golden; about 3 to 5 minutes.

To the top of each sandwich, divide the remaining ½ cup of cheese then slip under the broiler to melt. Transfer to a plate.

In a skillet, add about 2 teaspoons of butter and fry eggs sunny-side up; season with a pinch each of pepper and finishing salt. When done add one egg on top of each sandwich. Serve this with some pickles, more mustard and a knife and fork!

Steak 'n' Egg Sliders

Classic French cuisine has always leaned hard on the good old egg, basing hundreds of its recipes on them. One is called sauce gribiche, and it's really just a fancy cooked egg mayonnaise. It tastes great with fish, veggies and cold beef.

YIELD: 8 to 10 sliders

INGREDIENTS

- 2-pound strip steak or cold roast beef
- 4 tablespoons olive oil; divided
- ½ teaspoons sea salt; divided
- ¼ teaspoons pepper; divided
- 2 teaspoons grainy Dijon
- 3 tablespoons sour cream
- ¼ cup capers, drained
- 1 garlic dill pickle, coarsely chopped
- 1 cup coarsely chopped fresh flat leaf (Italian) parsley
- 1 shallot, chopped
- 3 hardboiled free-range eggs
- 8 to 10 small slider buns, we used brioche
- about 2 cups baby greens such as arugula, spinach, lettuce

PREPARATION

Rub the steak with about a teaspoon of the oil, and season with a pinch each of salt and pepper. Place into a scorching hot cast iron pan over high heat and cook on both sides to desired doneness. Transfer to a board to cool; after about 20 to 30 minutes slice thinly.

In the bowl of a food processor, add the remaining oil, salt and pepper, mustard, sour cream, capers, pickle, shallot and parsley, and blend until almost smooth. Add eggs, and blend until creamy.

To build the sandwich, add a generous layer of beef and top with the sauce and a pinch of baby greens.

Chopped Cobb Wrap

A take on the classic Cobb salad, this wrap is excellent for breakfast or lunch on the go. Wrap it up in parchment paper for a tidy and tasty sandwich. Some folks don't love blue cheese; that's OK, use crumbled feta instead. Depending on the size of the wrap you are filling go heavier or lighter on the ingredients, but we recommend the large 12-inch variety.

YIELD: makes two large wraps or more smaller wraps

INGREDIENTS

- 1 teaspoon runny honey
- 2 tablespoons Dijon mustard
- ⅓ cup mayonnaise
- ¼ teaspoons pepper
- pinch sea salt
- 6 slices of bacon; fried crisp; chopped
- 1 Romain lettuce heart, chopped, washed, spun dry
- 1 avocado, peeled, chopped
- 1 tomato, chopped
- ½ cup crumbled blue cheese
- 2 hardboiled free-range eggs, coarsely chopped
- 2 large wraps

PREPARATION

To make the dressing, add honey, mustard, mayonnaise, pepper and salt to a large bowl and whisk until smooth and combined.

Add bacon to a skillet over high heat and fry until crispy. Set aside to drain excess fat, chop.

Into the bowl of dressing, add all the ingredients except the wraps. Toss to coat evenly with the mayo.

To assemble the wraps, divide the mixture evenly between the wraps, making a mound just a bit lower than center. Fold up the bottom flap to cover the mound of filling, then fold in the sides, and roll tightly. Serve with a few pickles and something crunchy.

Western Personal Panzerotti

Familiar flavors in a new package. Take those much-loved western ingredients — ham, egg, bell pepper, onion — and wrap it up in pizza dough for perfect little baked panzerotti.

YIELD: makes four mini panzerotti

INGREDIENTS

- ¼ cup olive oil, divided
- 1 red bell pepper, diced
- 1 green bell pepper, diced
- 1 small onion, diced
- 1 cup diced ham
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- 6 free-range eggs
- 1 cup grated Monterey Jack cheese (or another favorite cheese)
- 1 pizza dough
- coarse sea salt or Kosher salt to taste

PREPARATION

Line a cookie sheet pan with parchment paper; set aside. Preheat oven to 450 degrees Fahrenheit.

Into a skillet over medium heat, add 2 tablespoons of the oil, the red and green peppers, onion, ham and oregano, stirring often. Cook until beginning to brown in places; about 10 minutes.

Into a bowl add the eggs and whisk until well-blended; add to skillet with pepper mixture, reduce heat to low and continue to stir and cook until the eggs are no longer liquid. Set aside.

Divide the pizza dough into four balls. On a lightly floured surface, roll each ball out then fill with the egg mixture, top with cheese and fold over into a half-moon; pinching or folding the edges to close. Brush with the remaining olive oil, sprinkle with a pinch of the salt, and use a knife to cut a couple of slits for steam to escape. Transfer to the prepared cookie sheet and bake for 15 to 20 or until golden.

The Swede

Elegant, flavorful and perfect for a fancyish brunch or lunch. We topped black ash sourdough toast with smoked trout, rich mascarpone infused with fresh dill, pickled beet and creamy, buttery scrambled eggs. Mascarpone might be too rich for some, so cream cheese, quark, or even extra-thick strained yogurt will do. This recipe is for two, but it's so easy to scale up; just figure on two eggs per slice of toast and double everything.

YIELD: makes two open-faced sandwiches

INGREDIENTS

- 2 slices of ash sourdough, pumpernickel or rye bread, toasted
- 6 tablespoons mascarpone
- ¼ cup fresh dill, finely chopped; plus more to garnish
- 1 to 2 pickled beets, sliced
- ½ cup smoked trout or another smoked fish, flaked or chopped
- 4 teaspoons butter
- 4 free-range eggs
- 2 tablespoons sour cream; plus more to garnish
- pinch sea salt
- pinch pepper

PREPARATION

In a bowl combine mascarpone and dill until smooth; set aside.

Toast the bread and allow to cool slightly; spread generously with the mascarpone, top with sliced beets.

In a small bowl whisk egg, sour cream, salt, pepper. In skillet over medium-low heat add butter; when melted add eggs. Stir constantly, to create creamy scrambled eggs. Do not brown or allow to dry out. After about 3 minutes of cooking add the fish, stir and stop cooking before you think you should, the eggs should be a little wet!

Divide the scrambled eggs over the dressed toast and garnish with a dollop of sour cream and sprig of fresh dill. For a fancy affair, a tiny mound of caviar or salmon roe would be lovely.

Open-faced Curried Egg Salad on Naan

There's a lot going on here and that makes this combo a real change of pace. It's a great appetizer for a party, too, just look for those little round pitas or naans to serve it on.

YIELD: makes two sandwiches

INGREDIENTS

- 2 tablespoons oil
- 1 small red onion finely chopped
- 1 clove minced garlic
- 1 minced jalapeño or another hot pepper (optional)
- 2 teaspoons curry powder
- ½ teaspoon cumin powder
- ½ teaspoon sea salt
- ¼ teaspoon pepper
- 1 finely chopped tomato
- ⅓ cup plain, extra thick full-fat yogurt
- 4 hardboiled free-range eggs, chopped
- 2 naan breads, toasted or grilled
- cilantro and finely sliced spring onions to garnish (optional)

PREPARATION

Into a skillet over medium-high heat add the oil, red onion, garlic, hot pepper (if using), curry powder, cumin powder, salt and pepper; fry, stirring constantly until fragrant and the onion is translucent — about 5 minutes. Add the chopped tomato and stir to fully combine; continue to cook until the tomato breaks down — about 3 to 5 minutes. Remove from heat.

Put the yogurt into a large bowl, then add two tablespoons of the hot onion mixture, stirring briskly. This will 'temper' the yogurt so it won't break from the heat. Add another tablespoon of the hot onion mixture and stir, and repeat with larger and larger spoonfuls until it's all been transferred to the bowl. Stir to combine completely.

Add the chopped eggs to the onion-yogurt mixture; combine and set aside.

Toast or grill the naans, then top with the egg. Garnish with cilantro and fresh green onion. Tastes best warm or room temperature.

Egg & Shrimp Salad Roll

Take the classic egg salad sandwich and add those tiny, sweet salad shrimp. Look for frozen over canned. We've used a hot dog roll, but brioche buns or soft white bread would work well, too.

YIELD: four rolls

INGREDIENTS

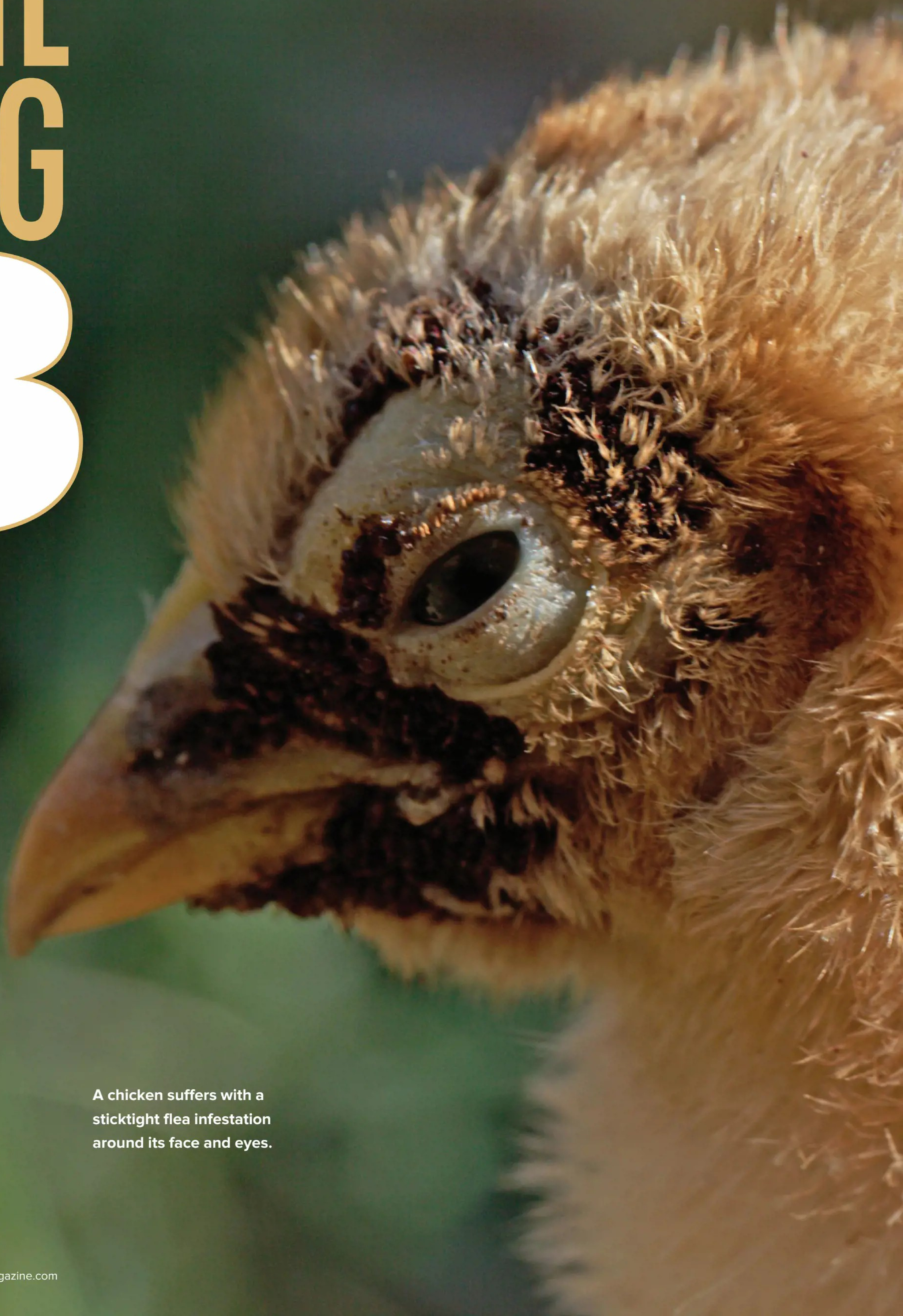
- ½ cup mayonnaise
- ¼ teaspoons sea salt
- ¼ teaspoons pepper
- 1 teaspoon fresh lemon zest
- 1 tablespoon pickle juice
- ⅓ cup finely diced celery heart stalks and leaves
- 4 finely diced gherkins or bread and butter pickles
- 1 finely diced shallot
- 4 hardboiled free-range eggs, coarsely chopped
- 2 cups cold cooked salad shrimp
- 4 buns or rolls

PREPARATION

Into a large bowl, add the mayo, salt, pepper, lemon zest, pickle juice, celery, gherkins, shallot and blend until combined. Add the eggs and shrimp, stir to combine and well coat. Set aside in the fridge until ready to fill buns and serve.

Signe Langford is a chicken-keeper, a gardener and a chef. She is the author of Happy Hens & Fresh Eggs: Keeping chickens in the kitchen garden, with 100 recipes.

THE BIG 3



A chicken suffers with a sticktight flea infestation around its face and eyes.

Infestations of certain types of parasites — **mites, lice and fleas** — can decrease egg production and affect bird health.

BY KATIE NAVARRA

Ectoparasites are those that feed on the skin, scales or feathers of your chickens. These may cause problems for your flock in terms of egg production and health, and in severe cases, may lead to fatalities. Ectoparasites are either continuous or temporary parasites.

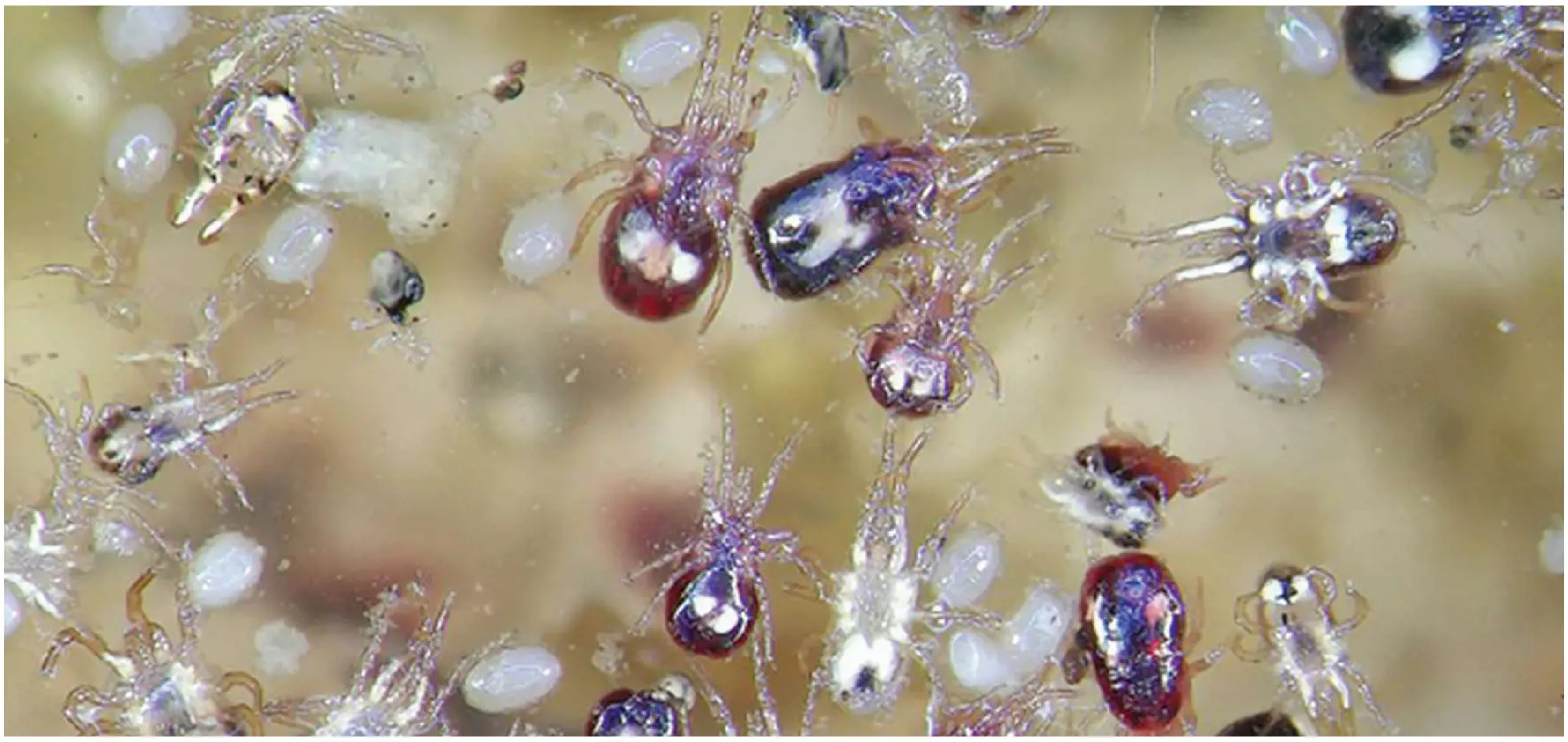
Continuous parasites spend their entire adult life cycle on the bird, while temporary parasites live off of the bird but feed on its blood. Amy Murillo, Ph.D., at the University of California, Riverside, identifies three ectoparasites to look for in your flock and shares her expertise for controlling parasite populations.

CHRWEISS/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

1 NORTHERN FOWL MITES

These mites (*Ornithonyssus sylviarum*) are the most prevalent parasites among chickens, living in the feathers along the birds' vents. Northern fowl mites are found in flocks around the country, but they prefer cooler climates and are most troublesome during the winter and spring months.

Northern fowl mites are only about 1⁄25 of an inch, have eight legs and are typically black or brown. "To check for northern fowl mites, closely observe the vent area of poultry," writes Jacquie Jacob, associate poultry specialist at the University of Kentucky, in *External Parasites of Poultry*. "Northern fowl mites appear as tiny specks moving quickly on the skin. Sometimes the most obvious indication of an infestation is the presence of eggs and mite fecal material (black specks) in the vent area.


DEJAN/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

Northern fowl mites are shown under a microscope.

2 LICE

There are several species of lice found on chickens, including the chicken body louse, shaft louse and fluff louse. Lice are pale yellow or white in color and mostly feed on feathers. Poultry lice are host specific and can't be transferred to humans. Fall and winter are the most common times to observe infestations.

Carrie Pickworth and Teresa Morishita write in *Common External Parasites in Poultry: Lice and Mites* for The Ohio State University Extension that the lice found on poultry do not suck blood as the lice found in other species of animals.

"Rather, they feed on dry skin scales, feathers and scabs," they write. "Inspect the ventral region of the bird for live lice crawling on the bird and for nits (lice eggs), as most infestations start in this area of the bird's body. Eggs are white and commonly appear in bunches on the lower feather shaft. Feathers of infested birds may have a moth-eaten appearance. Due to the feather damage, the bird may have a dull or roughened appearance."

DEJAN/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

Two white hens remove lice under their wings.

MARINA LOHRBACH/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

A free-range chicken takes a dirt bath to keep its feathers clean.

3 STICKTIGHT FLEAS

Sticktight fleas are also problematic. “The adult fleas embed themselves into the face, comb and wattles of the bird while they blood-feed,” Murillo says. “The immature fleas (larvae) live in organic material, such as bedding.”

Mating usually occurs on the bird, according to the Alabama Extension Service. “Female fleas lay eggs, which drop to the floor or into the litter. Eggs hatch in a few days, and slender white larvae feed on debris in cracks and litter on the floor. Larvae spin cocoons and pupate. Adult fleas then emerge from the pupal cases. Generations are completed in one to two months.”

CONTROLLING CHICKEN PARASITES

Cleanliness and biosecurity are the first lines of defense against parasites in your flock. Clean the coop regularly, and seal any cracks or crevices to limit rodent access.

“Keep wild birds and animals away from your flock, limit visitors and quarantine new birds,” Murillo advises.

Inspect your birds regularly, ideally monthly, and monitor parasite populations. Preferably, examine all birds, but if it’s a large flock or it’s too difficult to catch all the birds, focus on males, birds that look ill, or birds with damaged or commercially trimmed beaks.

“It is unlikely ectoparasites will be equally distributed among a flock, and these birds are most likely to harbor detectable levels,” Murillo says.

Insecticides may be used to treat infestations. Murillo cautions that not all insecticides are legal for use on birds in all states. Some may only be used in the coop or surrounding environment. The University of California, Riverside, department of veterinary entomology hosts a searchable database for registered insecticides by state that may be helpful in identifying products you can use.

Another alternative is providing a food-grade diatomaceous earth dust bath. “We found that the most effective way to use DE is to mix about six cups with approximately 25 pounds of washed play sand in a plastic container, such as a swimming pool or cement mixing bin,” Murillo says.

Simply dusting the birds or the environment is not enough. The birds must dust bathe in it and get the DE into their feathers.

DE is made of microscopic sharp particles that damage the exoskeleton of the ectoparasites. It may irritate people if not used in a well-ventilated area. Dust masks should be worn when handling.

“DE does not harm the birds,” Murillo says.

If you catch parasites in your flock early, you may be able to prevent damage to the long-term health of your chickens. ☒

Katie Navarra is a professional writer and photographer based in Clifton Park, New York. She regularly writes about the horse industry and general agriculture. She also provides copywriting services for small businesses. When she’s not writing, she is spending time in the barn with her horse, Bella.

CHICKS vs. PULLETS

Jump-starting your flock doesn't necessarily mean starting with newborn chicks. Here's what you need to know to weigh your options.

BY RACHEL TAYSE

One of the first considerations a potential poultry-keeper faces is whether to raise their flock from chicks or pullets. Welcoming day-old baby birds requires different structures and practices than "teenage" laying hens, and there are advantages and challenges to each stage.

WHAT YOU GET WITH CHICKS

Young chickens, ducks and turkeys are frequently sold as day-old chicks, ducklings and poults, respectively. They hatch from fertilized eggs at a hatchery or breeder and are immediately sold to their owners, often shipped via the United States Postal Service. (Read "In the Mail" on page 26 to learn about how this journey from hatchery to home occurs.)

IVAN KMIT/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

Starting with pullets can insure that you have all laying hens without any unexpected roosters.

Fluffy feathered babies of domesticated poultry can be raised without a mother, so long as the poultry-keeper assumes that role. They require warmth, shelter, food and water in a small enclosure called a brooder. Many people create a brooder from an open-topped bin or crate with a layer of wood chips and a suspended heat lamp.

"Make sure [the chicks] are never competing for food or water, keep the space dry and offer a variety of temperatures so that birds can move to the place they are most comfortable," says Jerah Pettibone of Pettibone Urban Game in Columbus, Ohio. "All these things lower stress and can prevent some common problems, like pasty butt, in chickens. Also, watch your birds carefully at first to look for potentially dangerous spots like deep water, corners to get stuck in and birds piling."

Finding a community locally or online is a great way to troubleshoot issues that might come up in the first weeks of raising birds. "Without a mamma, chicks and ducklings are fairly suicidal," Pettibone says. "Close attention and practice will help."

THE DIFFERENCE WITH PULLETS

Pullet is the name given to a young female chicken after it has molted into its adult feathering but before regularly laying eggs.

GRAPHIA/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

FOTIKPHOTO/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

PATRICK/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

A chick (above) becomes a pullet, or “teenage” hen, at around 15 weeks old.

Although farmers differ in naming the exact age, a female chicken is generally called a pullet until around 1 year old, which means she’s been laying for about six months.

The biggest challenge in beginning or adding young female birds to your homestead or farm is introduction. While chicks sometimes die because of dangers inherent in learning how to live, pullets can come with diseases such as avian pox, Marek’s disease and bronchitis, which require quarantine practices. Unless you’re rehoming an established group of birds, you’ll need to also pay attention to the flock dynamics so that your young pullets don’t injure one another.

“It is very important to quarantine new birds and to allow them time for social integration — especially with chickens and drakes,” Pettibone says.

She recommends four weeks of quarantine when introducing new birds to an established flock. A dog pen or small coop can be used for quarantine, and some farmers keep a small tractor-style coop for exactly this purpose.

“When you’re ready to integrate them, give the new birds their own cage with food and water inside your coop where the other birds can see them but not hurt them, for about a week,” Pettibone says. “Before letting new birds into the main coop, try moving things around a

Purchasing chicks is the least expensive route to starting poultry, provided you consider any brooder cost a long-term investment.

little so that all the birds have to claim new territory at the same time. You can also try letting new birds in during the night when the others are sleeping. This can ease the process."

Once the birds are fully introduced, the flock will need to re-establish its pecking order. This can often be difficult for a keeper to observe, as some fighting may occur in the first few days. Try to avoid interfering unless blood is drawn; if you have a wounded bird, remove and treat it immediately.

Be aware that if pullets have started to lay, they'll often stop for a short while adjusting to flock dynamics or coop arrangement. It may take up to three weeks to collect eggs again after introducing pullets to a new home or group of birds.

HOW TO CHOOSE

Purchasing chicks is the least expensive route to starting poultry, provided you consider any brooder cost a long-term investment. However, keeping baby birds requires more time and work. This input is justified if you want a specific breed, the desire to expose your children to the bird life cycle and more control over the husbandry practices needed to raise healthy birds.

Pullets are the fastest way to count on consistent egg production and great for those just starting out because a brooder isn't required. The risk of disease spread and flock disruption can be minimized with careful quarantine and introduction practices. Game birds, such as quail, partridge and chukar, don't tolerate shipping very well as chicks, so if you don't have a local source, choose hatching eggs or adults for those species.

Ultimately, most homesteaders end up welcoming both chicks and pullets to their operation at one time or another. It's useful to know how to raise both ages for when you're presented with the opportunity to expand or replace your flock.

Rachel Tayse is an urban farmer in Columbus, Ohio. Her 2-acre homestead includes permaculture gardens, backyard chickens, an organic vegetable plot and honeybees. Tayse practices land-sharing, alternative education and mindfulness to bring the restorative power of real food to the broader world.

LIGHTPOET/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

The word "pullet" is generally used for a hen younger than 1 year old.

Chicks will need to be raised separately in a brooder for 6 to 8 weeks, before moving them to the main coop.

BLACK BEARD/WIRESTOCK CREATORS/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

Best of Cluck
PHOTO CONTEST

It's that time of year again: **our annual photo contest!**

To honor you and your beautiful birds, we've put together another great photo contest that allows you a chance to win some awesome prizes.

This year, we're offering five categories to enter: Cutest Chick, Best Hen, Best Rooster, Best Group and Coolest Coop. See the following pages for more information on these categories and how to enter.

HOW TO ENTER

First, read the official rules on page 55. Then, take a digital photograph, using a digital camera or smartphone set at its highest resolution. (Check your owner's manual if you aren't sure how to do this.) All digital files must be in JPEG format. The minimum size at 300 dpi is 3-by-5 inches.

To submit a digital photograph, email it as a JPEG file to **chickens@chickensmagazine.com**, with the subject line "**Best of Cluck**." In the email, include the category you are entering, your name, your mailing address, your phone number and any thing else you'd like to share, such as the name of the bird(s), what you like best about keeping chickens, etc. Just keep it to 100 words or less.

You may enter all five categories listed on the following pages, but you may enter only three digital photographs per category. If you are entering multiple categories, you must email each digital image separately, and each email must have all the requested information.

Entry Deadline:
MARCH 24,
2025

Due to the amount of entries, we will not be able to respond to emails. Only the winners will be notified. Enter now: As always, we wish you the best of cluck!

NO PURCHASE NECESSARY TO ENTER. Contest is open to legal residents of the 50 United States and District of Columbia, age 21 or older. Entries must be received between 12:00:01 a.m. PT on 10/28/2024 and 11:59:59 p.m. PT on 3/24/2025. See Official Rules on page 55. Void where prohibited by law. Sponsor: EG Media Investments

COURTESY 2024 WINNER ELIZABETH HAAS

Best of
500+ TIPS FOR RUNNING A MODERN SMALL FARM OR HOMESTEAD
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2024 COLLECTOR'S EDITION • SPECIAL DOUBLE ISSUE
Farming Features
• Two-Wheel Tractor Essentials
• Cash Crops That Turn a Profit
• Garden-Friendly Mushrooms
• Perennial Plants for Multiple Harvests
• Sweet Corn for Market
• Farm Outbuilding Structures
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And More!
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• Plan a Chicken Farm
• Pasture Ruminants Perfectly
• Trim Your Goats' Hooves
• Consider Beehive Styles
• Raise & Market Exotic Fowl
• Keep Kunekune Pigs & Babydoll Southdown Sheep

THE FORGOTTEN ART OF BASKET WEAVING
FUN FALL CRAFT: PRESSING FLOWERS
SWEET POTATO CRUMB PIE & SPICED APPLE RINGS
NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2024
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Raise Ostrich for its delicious red meat without the fat
SUPER SOIL SOLUTIONS
• Raise Compost Worms for Groundbreaking Fertilizer
• No-Till Sustainable Farming Techniques
12 FALL MARKET CROPS THAT CRUSH

CUTEST CHICK

Sponsored by ***Hobby Farms* & EG Media**

Assignment: Send us an image of your chick(s) that will make us smile. It can be a solitary shot or several peeps together. Just make sure we'll melt when we see it.

Prize: a $50 gift card, a 1-year subscription to *Hobby Farms* magazine and a copy of *Best of Hobby Farms* 2025.

COURTESY 2024 WINNER MARY VAN HOOGMOED

BEST ROOSTER

Sponsored by **Murray McMurray Hatchery** (www.mcmurrayhatchery.com)

Assignment: Do you have a cocky rooster that likes to have his picture taken? If so, snap away and send us an image of your regal ruler of the roost.

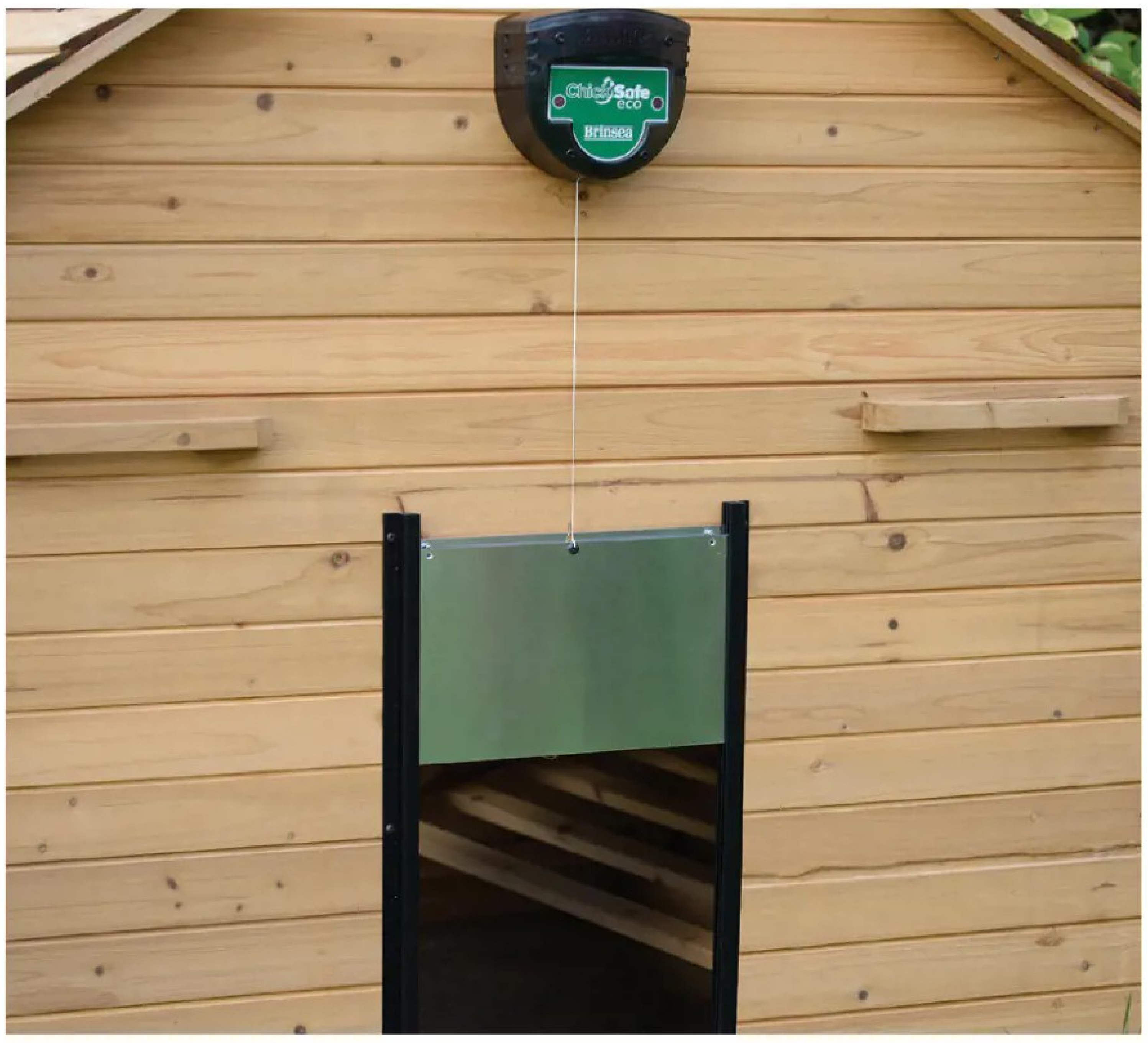
What You Could Win: **a $100 gift certificate to Murray McMurray's online store** for poultry and/or other merchandise. Murray McMurray Hatchery provides the highest quality poultry and auxiliary products to their customers, and have been a trusted, knowledgeable industry resource for more than 100 years. Whether you are an experienced or novice enthusiast, you will enjoy its wide selection of breeds and supplies to assist you with raising your flock.

MURRAY McMURRAY
gift certificate

A Gift for You in the Amount of
$100.00
Congratulations! This gift certificate is valid on any poultry or equipment purchase from McMurrayHatchery.com.

MURRAY McMURRAY

COURTESY 2024 WINNER LYNDSEY RHODES



BEST HEN

Sponsored by **Brinsea Products** (www.brinsea.com)

Assignment: Send us a pic of your favorite hen doing what she does best, be it posing on the roost, lounging on the nest or strutting her stuff down the chicken run(way).

What You Could Win: **A ChickSafe Eco Automatic Chicken Coop Door** (pictured above, retail value: $150). This tough and reliable system automatically opens the coop door in the morning and closes it in the evening as light levels fall, keeping your birds save and giving you peace of mind.

Brinsea
Incubation Specialists

COOLEST COOP

Sponsored by ***Chickens* magazine & EG Media**

Assignment: Send us an image of your coop, homemade or store-bought. It can be an interior, exterior, covered run or whatever makes it your chickens' home, sweet home.

What You Could Win: $50 gift card for coop accessories

FINE
GOLD
999.9
NETWT
1000g

COURTESY 2024 WINNER ERIC DIGGINS

COURTESY 2024 WINNER HOLLY BENNINGTON

BEST GROUP

Sponsored by ***Chickens* magazine & EG Media**

Assignment: Take a photo of a rooster and hen "snuggling," a hen with her chicks, hens gossiping or your flock free-ranging.

What You Could Win: $50 gift card to buy more chickens!

BEST OF CLUCK PHOTO CONTEST OFFICIAL RULES

Sponsor/Entry Period: Enter between 12:00:01 a.m. PT on 10/28/2024 and 11:59:59 p.m. PT on 3/24/2025. (“Entry Period”).

Sponsor: EG Media Investments LLC, 2222 Sedwick Road, Durham, NC 27713.

Eligibility: Open to legal residents of the 50 United States and D.C., 21 years or older. Employees of Sponsor are not eligible to enter.

How to Enter: Email your photo(s) (“Theme”) to chickens@chickensmagazine.com, with the subject line “Best of Cluck” and include the category you are entering, your name, your mailing address, your phone number and any other information you’d like to share about the photo. You may enter all four categories, but you may enter only two digital photographs per category. If you are entering multiple categories, you must send each digital photograph separately, and each email must have all the requested information. One entry per category/per person/email/household.

Requirements of Entry: Entries must meet the following requirements and you represent and warrant and agree that:

- Your Entry was created by you or you have the rights or received prior permission from any person involved in its creation or any person depicted in the materials and you have the right to use the Entry, and all elements of the Entry, and can grant the license granted herein;
- The Entry does not contain any prominent use of third party trademarks, trade names, brands or logos;
- The Entry does not depict any individual other than the Entrant;
- The Entry does not defame or otherwise violate the rights of any third party; and
- The Entry can't be offensive or contain any elements such as nudity, graphically violent imagery, sexually suggestive imagery or be explicitly racial, profane, slanderous or visually depict alcohol or gambling or be contrary to the interests of Contest or Sponsor, as determined in the sole discretion of the Sponsor.

Grant of License: By entering, you grant Sponsor the perpetual, fully paid, irrevocable, exclusive license to reproduce, distribute, license, display or otherwise use throughout the world your Entry in any manner for any purpose, including advertising for Sponsor or others without further consent or payment to you or any other person or entity. The Entry may be published and posted online, but you agree that Sponsor has no obligation to post or publish your Entry and that such posting or publication has no bearing on whether you are a winner. You will hold Sponsor harmless from any claim by any third party relating to any rights in your Entry.

Winner Selection: Five potential Winners will be selected by Sponsor from all eligible entries received during the Entry Period. The odds of winning are determined by the number of eligible Entries received.

Judging: Judging consists of two rounds of evaluation. In round one, editors will select five entries from among all eligible entries based on the following criteria (“Judging Criteria”): (1) Creativity: 50%; (2) Photographic Quality: 50%. The entries selected in round one will proceed to round two. In round two, editors will collectively select a winner for each prize level based on Judging Criteria. In the event of a tie, the tied entries will be resubmitted to the Judges for a rejudging between the tied entries alone. In the event that a tie remains after rejudging, the entry with the highest score in the creativity criteria will be declared the winner. Decisions of the Judges are final and binding.

Winner Notification: Potential winners will be notified on or about 6/1/2025 via the email address they provide at entry. If a winner doesn’t respond within 72 hours, the email is undeliverable (sent three times over five days), if entrant is ineligible or doesn’t accept the prize, the prize will be forfeited and the next runner-up will be selected. Acceptance of prize constitutes permission (except where prohibited by law) to use each winner’s name, city and state where winner is located and likeness for promotional purposes without further compensation.

Prizes: The prizes to be awarded and the approximate retail value (“ARV”) will be disclosed on pages 52-54. Winners are responsible for any taxes on prize. No substitution or cash equivalent permitted, except by Sponsor. Prize is nontransferrable. One prize per person/household.

Conditions: Entrants agree to the Official Rules and the decisions of the Sponsor, which are final and binding. Entrants release, defend and hold harmless Sponsor and companies providing prizes from any and all liability whatsoever against Sponsor and companies providing prizes arising out of Entrant’s participation or use of a prize. Sponsor is not responsible for any error in the printing of the offer, administration of the Contest or the announcement of any prize or in the event Sponsor is prevented from continuing the Contest by any event beyond its control. Entries that have been tampered with, altered or generated by an automated device are void. Sponsor is not responsible for lost, late, illegible entries or delay, error or interruption in transmission of Entries. Sponsor reserves the right to disqualify any Entry or terminate the Contest if it becomes technically corrupted and/or select winners from among all eligible Entries received prior to termination. If there are not enough qualified Entries to qualify as Finalists, Sponsor reserves the right to select less than the number of Finalists listed in these Official Rules. In the event of any complaint alleging a violation of any third-party right relating to an Entry, Sponsor reserves the right to disqualify the Entry. By participating, Entrant acknowledges that Sponsor does not waive any rights to use similar or related ideas that might be contained in an Entry. Any and all claims in connection with the Contest must be brought in a court within the State of Delaware and the all disputes will be governed by the laws of the State of Delaware and shall be resolved individually, without resort to any form of class action. BY PARTICIPATING, ENTRANT HEREBY WAIVES ANY RIGHTS OR CLAIMS TO ATTORNEY’S FEES, INDIRECT, SPECIAL, PUNITIVE, INCIDENTAL OR CONSEQUENTIAL DAMAGES OF ENTRANT, WHETHER FORESEEABLE OR NOT AND WHETHER BASED ON NEGLIGENCE OR OTHERWISE.

Winner’s List: For names of the winners, mail a self-addressed, stamped envelope to Sponsor at Chickens, 2222 Sedwick Road, Durham, NC 27713.

Privacy: Information you submit will be subject to Sponsor’s Privacy Policy.

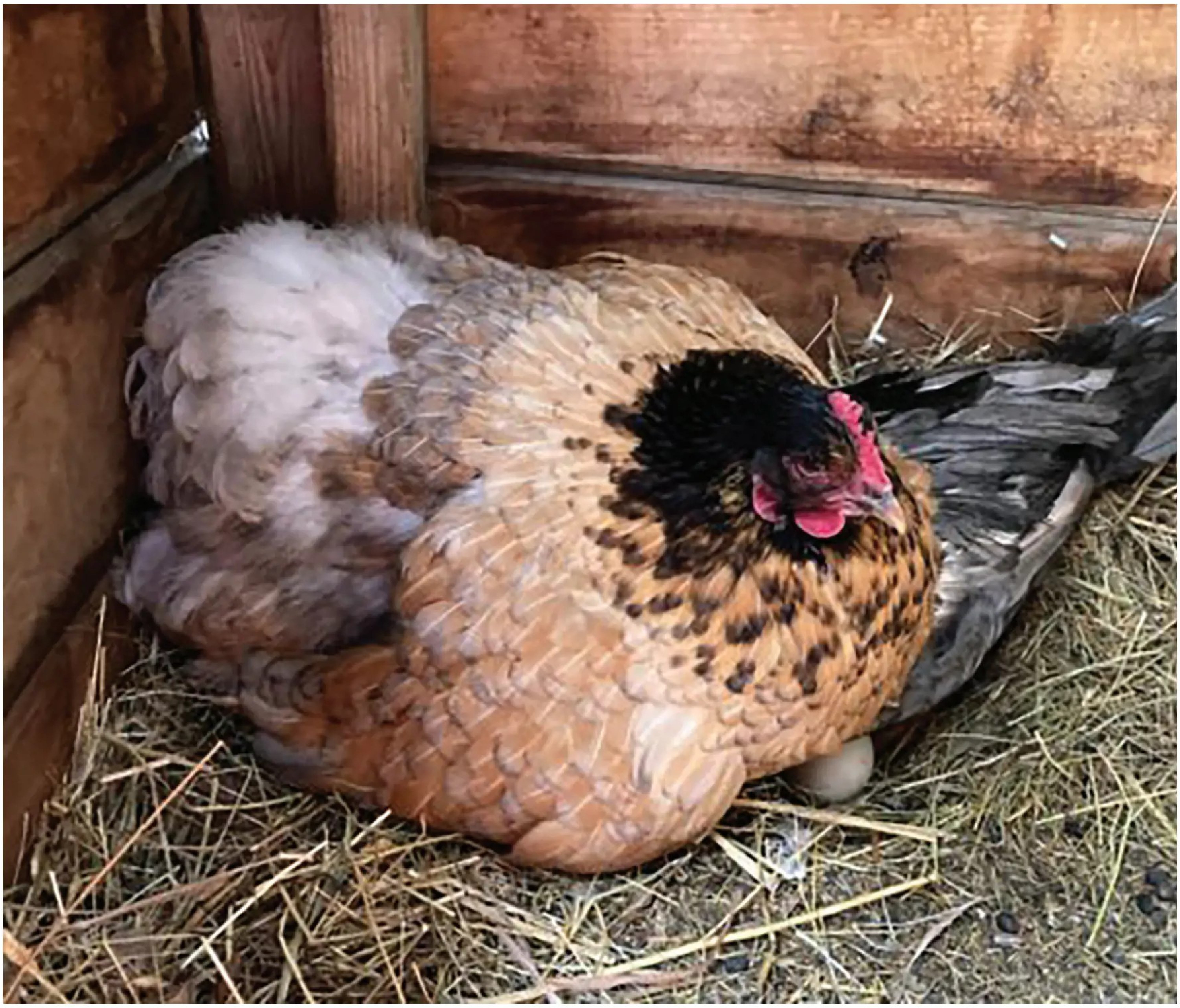
Feather SCORING

Score your chickens' feathers to determine the overall health of your flock.

BY SHERRI TALBOT

SHERRI TALBOT

Level 1: This chicken got in an argument with this duck over ownership of the nest. She is showing no bare skin but has a patch of feathers missing at the base of her tail.



SHERRI TALBOT

Chicken feathers serve several purposes for birds and humans. For hens, their feathers provide camouflage and protection from the weather. For the roosters, they're a way to win mates. For scientists, farmers and show judges, feathers provide a measure of poultry health. While annual molting is a normal part of a chicken's life cycle, other feather loss can be a sign of something wrong in your flock.

There are many reasons chickens may lose their feathers that suggest health issues in the bird. Parasites, illnesses, stress and other culprits are all possible issues.

PARASITES

Poultry mites can infest chickens and burrow into the skin next to the feathers. This causes the birds to pull out their feathers to rid themselves of the irritation. Other mites and lice can cause similar reactions. Signs of these parasites on birds are often a signal that the entire flock is infested and likely the coop and run as well.

It's important to verify that parasites are the issue before treatment. Bacteria or fungal infections can also cause feather loss in a flock and often require medication.

PHYSICAL CAUSES

Feathers are made up primarily of protein and birds may consume a flock mate's feathers to make up for a protein deficit. Other micronutrient deficiencies can cause cannibalizing behaviors as well. Keep in mind that nutritional needs will vary depending on the breed, time of year, age of the birds and other factors.

Bald chickens can also be a symptom of exposure to toxins or overheating. While it can easily be attributed to a stress problem, feather picking because of extreme temperatures, lack of fresh water or high ammonia levels can be symptom of much more severe issues. In fact, feather picking and levels of loss are often used by animal welfare experts to determine the safety and health of a flock.

STRESSORS

Some stress-induced feather pulling may exist in even a healthy flock since pecking order clashes can involve physical

Feathers are made up primarily of protein and **birds may consume a flock mate's feathers to make up for a protein deficit.**

altercations. However, if the behavior persists or birds are found with severe feather loss, this is often more than normal, competitive behavior. Feather loss can be caused by higher-status hens bullying flock mates. Boredom, cramped quarters, predators and other stressors can result in chickens plucking out each other's feathers.

If birds appear to be stressed, widening runs and providing enrichment activities can help to reduce issues with overcrowding or lack of stimulation. Roosters can help with the regulation of a flock, though if there are too few hens for an amorous male, over-mating may also cause feather loss in the hens. In this case, it is caused by him repeatedly mounting them and pulling their feathers out.

MEASURING CHICKEN FEATHER LOSS

Feather scoring is a measure of feather loss in a flock. Measuring about 50% of the birds in a flock is suggested to best determine the overall flock health, and a single bird missing large numbers of feathers isn't likely to be seen as a sign of concern. Scoring is done on a scale of 0 to 2 and shouldn't be done when birds are molting.

Birds with a score of 0 are missing no feathers or may be missing a single feather here and there at most. There should be no skin showing. Checking the area around the vent is important.

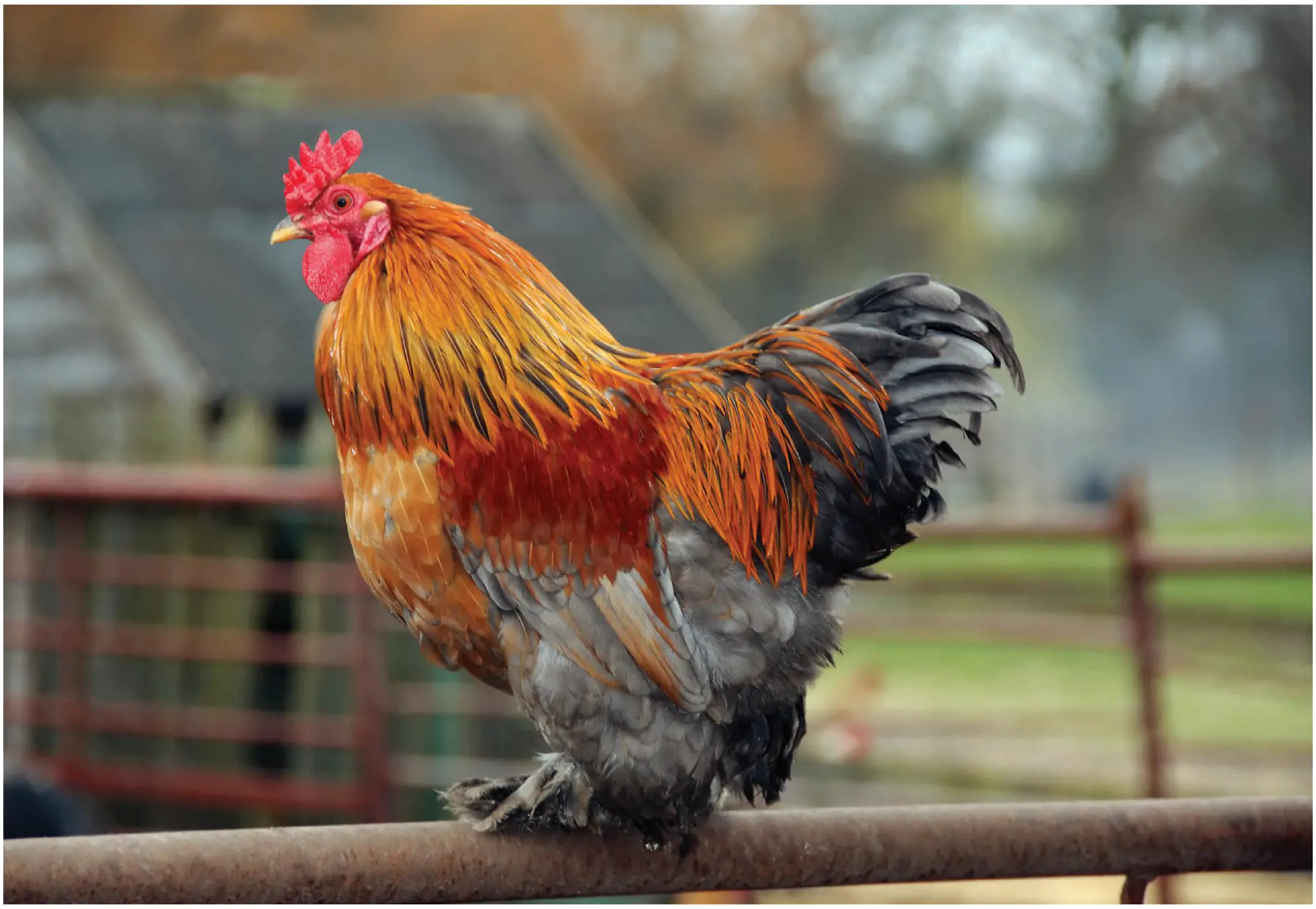
Birds with a score of 1 may have small amounts of skin showing and noticeable missing or broken feathers. The bird may look slightly ruffled.

Birds with a score of 2 have large swaths of skin showing, major feathers may be broken, and the bird will look quite ragged. Flocks with a high number of level 2 scores have also been correlated with high levels of illness in the birds, underweight flocks and poorer production in laying hens.

Since chickens are prey animals, they will often hide issues and can be difficult to diagnose. Knowing the possible signs and symptoms associated with feather loss can help identify issues in a flock more quickly.

Sherri Talbot is the co-owner and operator of Saffron and Honey Homestead in Windsor, Maine. She raises endangered livestock breeds and educates on heritage breeds, sustainable living and the importance of eating locally.

BECKY STARES/STOCK.ADOBE.COM



Level 0: This handsome rooster is missing no feathers, shows no bare patches and everything is lying smoothly

wing tip

Herbs and **garlic** can help keep your flock in fine shape.

Poultry are susceptible to a dismaying variety of diseases and health problems caused by viruses, bacteria, parasites, nutrient deficiencies and other factors. Marek's disease, infectious coryza and Newcastle disease are just a few of the nasty illnesses circulating the bird world. On the bright side, small flocks tend to be hardy and healthy, especially when farmers pay attention to biosecurity and provide their birds with a healthy diet and clean, uncrowded quarters.

A chicken's body will give you a lot of signs about its health. Healthy chickens breathe easily and evenly, and they maintain a temperature of around 103 degrees Fahrenheit. Their normal pulse averages 300 beats per minute, but it can reach 400 beats per minute if the chicken is stressed.

The wattles and comb on a chicken are more than flashy appendages; they regulate temperature by cooling the blood that circulates through the skin. The wattles and comb should be firm and bright red; a chicken's eyes should be bright and alert. A healthy chicken will stand erect with its head and tail elevated. The shanks and feet should have plump scales that are clean and smooth with a waxy appearance. The feathers should be smooth, neat and clean — not ruffled or broken and stained. When you pick up the bird, its body should feel heavy and firm.

ESSENTIAL HERBS

To keep your hens in top shape, consider what you feed them. For thousands of years, cultures around the world have embraced herbs, plants and roots for their medicinal properties. More and more chicken-keepers are recognizing that they are what they eat — be that the chicken or its eggs! That means passing by sulfur-based and other synthetic medications and seeking alternatives for their own health and the health of their birds.

Consider the following list when choosing an herb for your bird's condition. Always check with your vet before administering any plants, as many varieties can be potentially poisonous.

BURDOCK: used as a tonic herb; eliminates toxins and enhances liver function

DANDELION: nutritious for humans and poultry alike; contains vitamins, minerals, micronutrients and fiber; also a natural diuretic that can replace lost potassium; stimulates liver function

LEMON VERBENA: an excellent digestive aid; highly aromatic

MINT(S): cooling, especially in the summer; all mints stimulate digestion and make a great insect repellent. Note: Purple mint (*perilla frutescens*) can be poisonous.

NETTLE: antihistamine and astringent (a compound that shrinks body tissues); highly nutritious

PENNYROYAL: excellent flea repellent

ROSE: sweet, floral; rose hips are high in vitamins C and E; the leaves of the plant are astringent, bacteriostatic (stops bacteria from reproducing) and nutritious

ROSEMARY: strong-smelling and potent; a great natural insect repellent; antimicrobial and can be used as an antioxidant

SWEET ANNIE: contains essential oils and compounds that bind with parasite proteins, thereby effective in warding off diseases transmitted through parasites

THYME: potent against viral infections; antimicrobial and antifungal; can provide a boost to the immune system

WORMWOOD: contains a volatile oil called thujone, which stimulates digestion; contains vermifuge, which works against parasite infestation

GIVE SOME GARLIC

The benefits of garlic for poultry can't be overlooked. In fact, if there were only one natural remedy used on poultry, garlic should be it! This powerful vegetable (of which we usually eat the root, or bulb) is a natural antibiotic, so the body doesn't buildup resistance to its benefits. Garlic boosts your birds' immunities, fighting all manner of ailments from the inside, out.

You can easily create a garlic oil supplement for your chickens with this recipe, which serves up to 10 chickens.

INGREDIENTS

- 1 to 3 cloves garlic (depending on your birds' tolerance), chopped or minced
- 1/4 cup olive oil
- 2 cups layer feed
- 1 cup of scratch

PREPARATION

Steep garlic and oil in a glass jar for 3 to 4 hours, preferably on a windowsill or in the sun. Combine layer feed and scratch, mix evenly in a "chicken-safe" bowl.

Drizzle oil infusion over the feed/scratch mix, and turn to coat. Provide to birds immediately, and use any leftover oil within 36 hours.

A Dozen Delights

It started when I moved from Las Vegas, Nevada, to the small town of Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. As we were now living outside the city limits on 3 acres of land, I decided that I would love to add some animals to raise.

I came across a few profiles on Instagram of people having and raising chickens. The photos they posted were beautiful, and I wanted to have a flock of my own. I didn't know much about chickens at that time so I did my research and I decided to go with my first four. I ordered an ISA Brown (Coco), two Buff Orphingtons (Bella and Stella) and a Black Australorp (Cola).

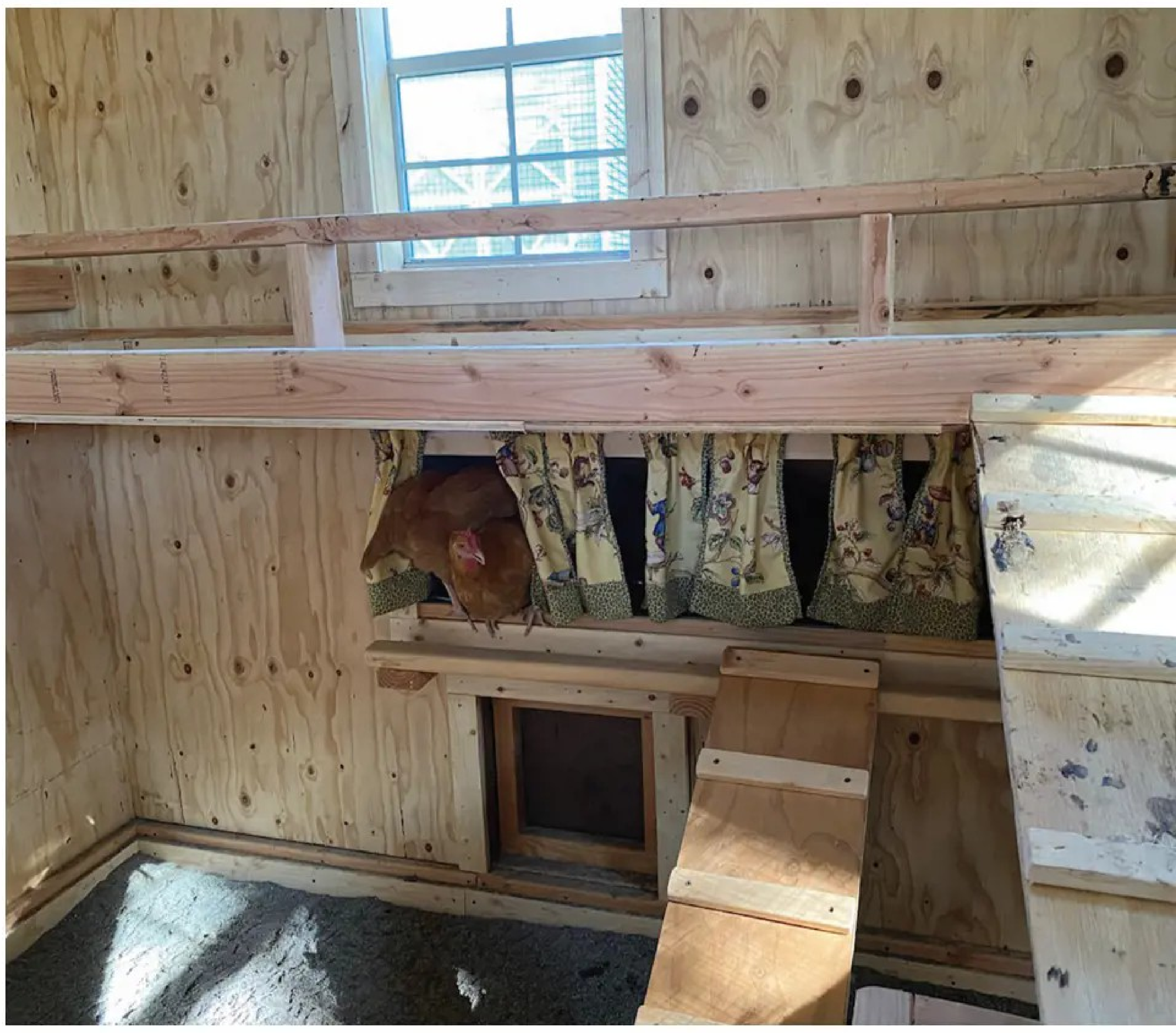
When they arrived, Coco was wobbling a lot and had a difficult time holding a balance. I was so scared that we were going to lose her, but with some electrolytes and feed, she made progress. Every day, she got stronger and stronger until she started to walk, jump and scratch! She is so curious about everything and always tries to catch up with everyone. She is now my best layer and the sweetest hen. She loves to supervise everything that I do.

4 + 4 = MORE

I loved my flock of four, but as I kept researching chickens and all the different breeds, I wanted to add more. I decided on Barred Rock (Luna and Java) and Sapphire Gem (Lily, a light gray/silver, and Ruby, dark gray) pullets. Java later became Jive as he ended up being a cockerel that I had to re-home. (He went to a very good home at a farm.)

They were the most adorable baby chicks. After six weeks, I moved them from the brooder to the outside coop. I had to get another coop and run built for the four chicks as I didn't want them in same area as my original four.

I had eight in the flock, and I was happy. But I started to see people posting beautiful pictures



of their colored eggs, and I was very interested. Once again, I researched into adding breeds that laid eggs of colors other than white or brown to my flock. I decided to go with Ameraucunas and Easter Eggers, so the order was placed and I awaited my new chicks to arrive.

I now have a flock of 12 and four coops; it's a regular miniature chicken village in my backyard! My original four live in the big coop. Inside their run is a smaller coop with an additional run for Maja and Kaja. The three youngest — Lulu, Kora and Mika — live in their own coop and have their own 8-by-8-foot run. Lily, Ruby and Luna also have a coop and 8-by-8-foot run.

They all free-range together without any issues. The young ones follow the big girls, and they all know the area and come back to their own coops. I supervise free-range time, as I'm usually outside doing garden work or just sitting, relaxing and watching them do their thing.

MY FURRY FRIENDS

My favorite thing about keeping chickens is getting to know my beautiful birds. They're more than just a chicken: They're my pets. They know their names, follow me around and come to me when I call their names. They're very smart and bring me joy and happiness.

They also keep me in shape because they do require a lot of care, especially during summer! I clean their runs daily, making sure they have clean, cold water and electrolytes, as well as shade. I place fans inside their runs so they have a cool breeze, and they get frozen fruits and treats.

For nutrition, I buy organic feed. They prefer crumbles as they're not fans of pellets. I mix organic scratch grains with sunflowers and pumpkin seeds.

For treats, they love dry mealworms, watermelon on a hot day and "salads." (I mix leafy greens, with tomatoes, grape, cucumber, cooked eggs and cottage cheese). Lettuce and kale are their favorite. I also give them some kitchen scraps, leftover spaghetti, rice, etc. but all in moderation.

Chickens are just so great to have; I love my chickens.

Find Sylvia J. on Instagram @sylvia0223.

Tell Us *Your* Story!

Email the story of your flock in ~750 words to **chickens@chickensmagazine.com** (subject line: Chicken Chat). Be sure to include high-resolution images of yourself, your chickens and/or your coop.

NO PURCHASE NECESSARY TO ENTER. Contest is open to legal residents of the 50 United States or District of Columbia, age 21 or older. Entries must be received between 12:00:01 a.m. PT on 12/25/2024 and 11:59:59 p.m. PT on 2/25/2025. See Official Rules on page 64. Void where prohibited by law. Sponsor: EG Media Investments LLC

CHRISTOPHER BOSWELL/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

Something to Drink

Provide clean, pure water for birds at all times. Increase the supply to 3 gallons per day for each 100 chicks at six weeks of age; to 5 gallons at 10 weeks, and to 6 gallons at 12 or 13 weeks of age. Supply 6 to 8 gallons of water daily for each 100 layers. Provide additional water when temperatures are above 80 degrees; for example, at temperatures above this level, 100 layers require at least 9 gallons of water per day.

— "Small Flock Series: Managing a Family Chicken Flock," Jesse J. Lyons, Department of Animal Sciences, University of Missouri Extension

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FULL SWEEPSTAKES & CONTEST RULES

ONE COOL COOP, CHICKEN CHAT & SHUTTERCLUCKS

OFFICIAL RULES • NO PURCHASE NECESSARY TO ENTER OR WIN

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How to Enter Shutterclucks: Email your photo(s) ("Theme") to chickens@chickensmagazine.com, with the subject line "Shutterclucks" and include your name and mailing address. You may enter up to three images per issue. **Requirements of Entry:** Entries must meet the following requirements and you represent and warrant and agree that: Your Entry was created by you or you have the rights or received prior permission from any person involved in its creation or any person depicted in the materials and you have the right to use the Entry, and all elements of the Entry, and can grant the license granted herein; The Entry does not contain any prominent use of third party trademarks, trade names, brands or logos; The Entry does not depict any individual other than the Entrant; The Entry does not defame or otherwise violate the rights of any third party; and The Entry can't be offensive or contain any elements such as nudity, graphically violent imagery, sexually suggestive imagery or be explicitly racial, profane, slanderous or visually depict alcohol or gambling or be contrary to the interests of Contest or Sponsor, as determined in the sole discretion of the Sponsor. **Grant of License:** By entering, you grant Sponsor the perpetual, fully paid, irrevocable, exclusive license to reproduce, distribute, license, display or other-wise use throughout the world your Entry in any manner for any purpose, including advertising for Sponsor or others without further consent or payment to you or any other person or entity. 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For photo contest: In round one, editors will select 5 entries from among all eligible entries based on the following criteria ("Judging Criteria"): (1) Creativity: 50%; (2) Photographic Quality: 50%. The entries selected in round one will proceed to round two. In round two, editors will collectively select a winner based on Judging Criteria. In the event of a tie, the tied entries will be resubmitted to the Judges for a rejudging between the tied entries alone. In the event that a tie remains after rejudging, the entry with the highest score in the readability criteria will be declared the winner. Decisions of the Judges are final and binding. Winner Notification: Potential winners will be notified via the email address they provide at entry approximately one month after the contest end date. 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IN THE KITCHEN

recipe & photo by Lori Rice

Chicken & Sweet Potato STEW

Chicken thighs cook until tender pieces blend with sweet potatoes in this easy slow-cooker stew. A mix of orange and white sweet potato varieties creates a blend of flavors and textures for this hearty meal. It's spiced with cumin and sage for a comforting dinner that is a welcomed addition to any fall or winter evening. Pair it with a piece of crusty homemade bread or your favorite winter greens salad.

SERVINGS: 4 to 6

INGREDIENTS

- 1½ pounds boneless, skinless chicken thighs
- 1½ pounds mixed sweet potatoes, peeled and cubed
- 1 medium yellow onion, chopped
- 3 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon ground black pepper
- ¼ teaspoon ground cumin
- ¼ teaspoon garlic powder
- ¼ teaspoon rubbed sage
- 2½ cups chicken stock
- ¼ cup heavy cream
- ½ cup finely chopped lacinato kale

PREPARATION

Place the chicken thighs in the bottom of a 5- to 7-quart slow cooker. Scatter the sweet potatoes and onion over the chicken.

Sprinkle with the flour, a ½ teaspoon of salt, pepper, cumin, garlic powder and sage.

Pour in the chicken stock and cream and stir a little to surround the chicken in the liquids.

Place the lid on the slow cooker and set on high. Cook for 3½ to 4 hours, until the chicken is fall-apart tender.

Use two forks to gently break up and shred the chicken being careful not to break up the potatoes too much. Stir in the kale and the remaining ½ teaspoon of salt to taste. Serve warm.

Lori Rice is a writer, photographer and nutritional scientist. Her current passion is small-scale food production. Find find her portfolio at www.loririce.com.

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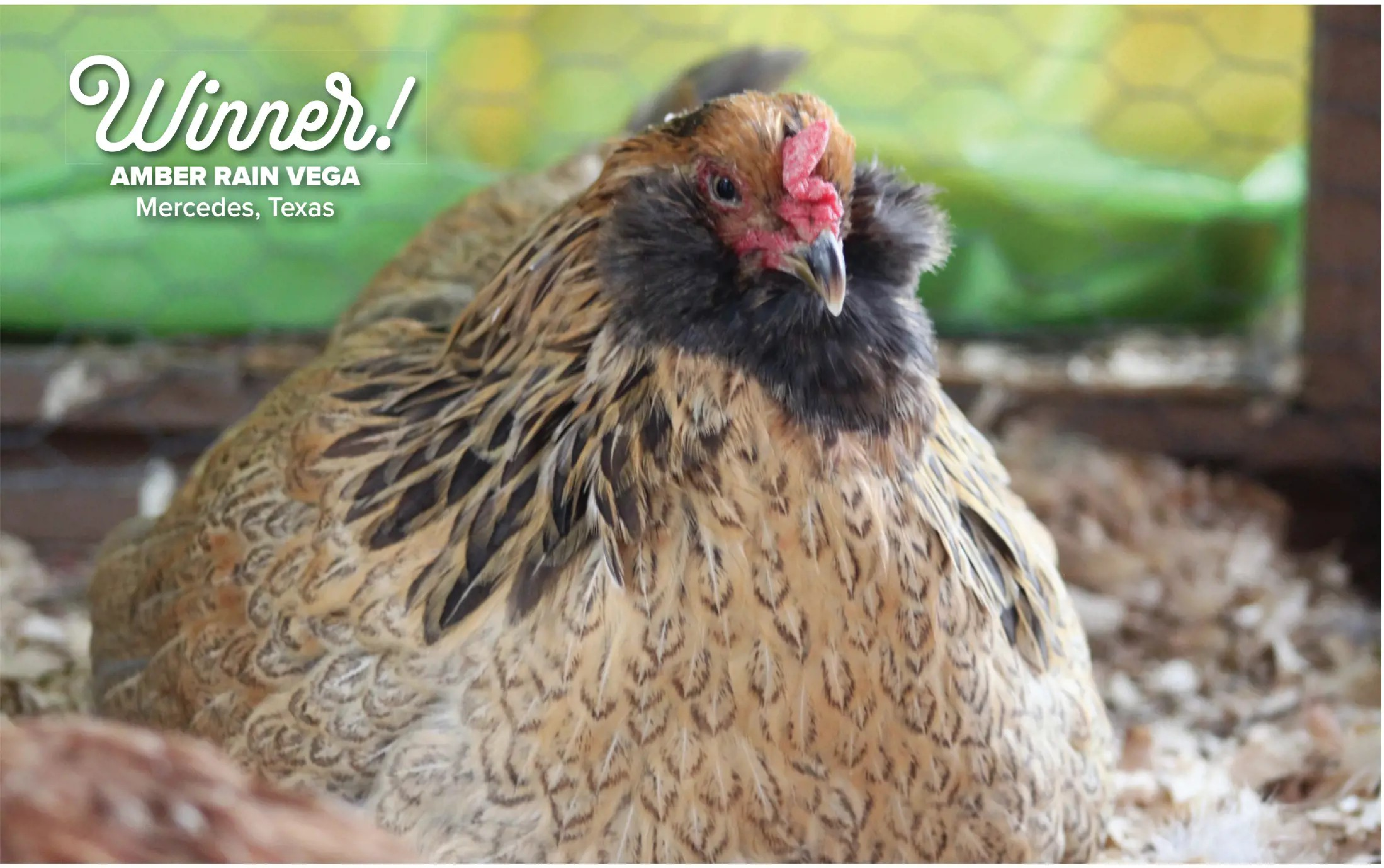
Shutterclucks



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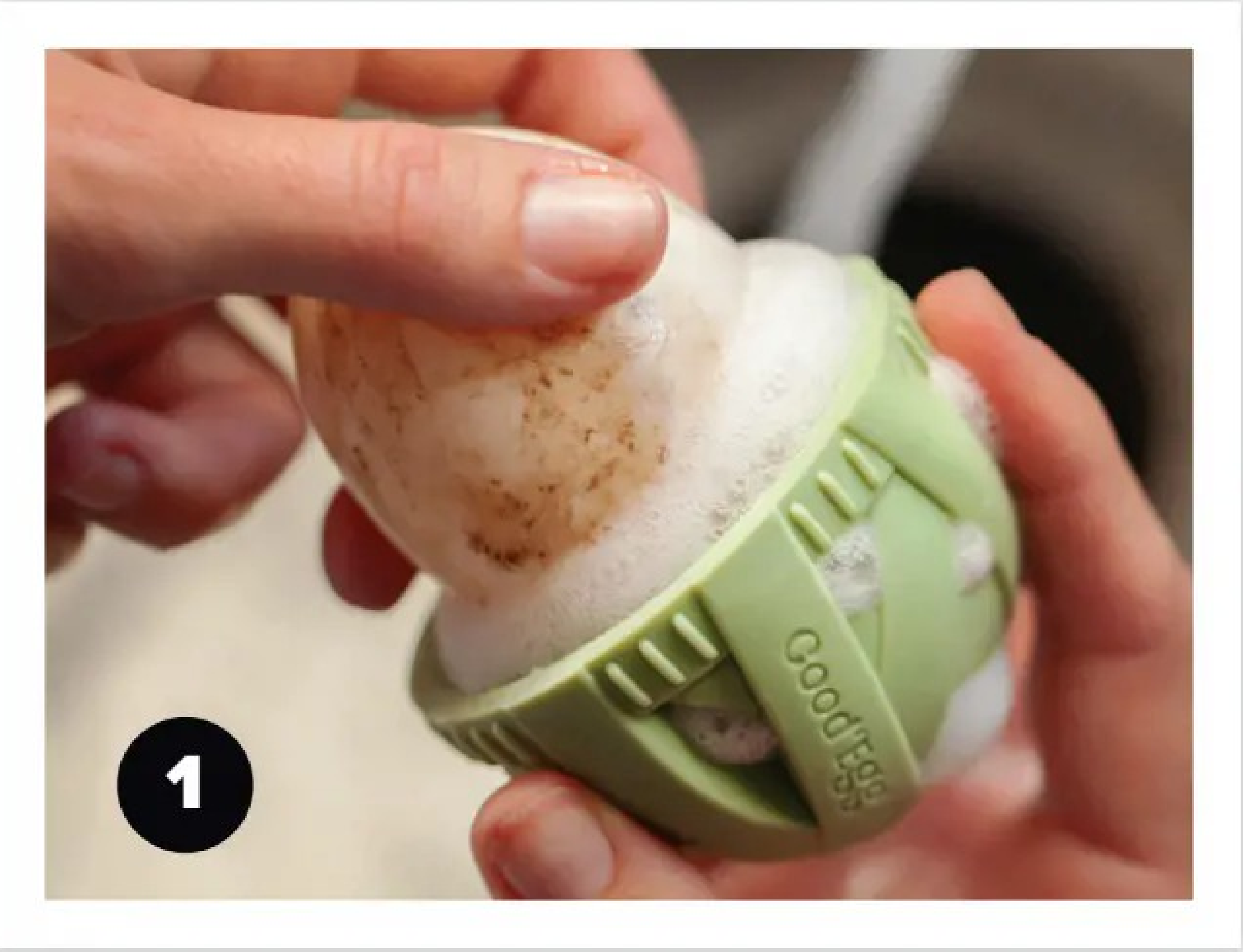
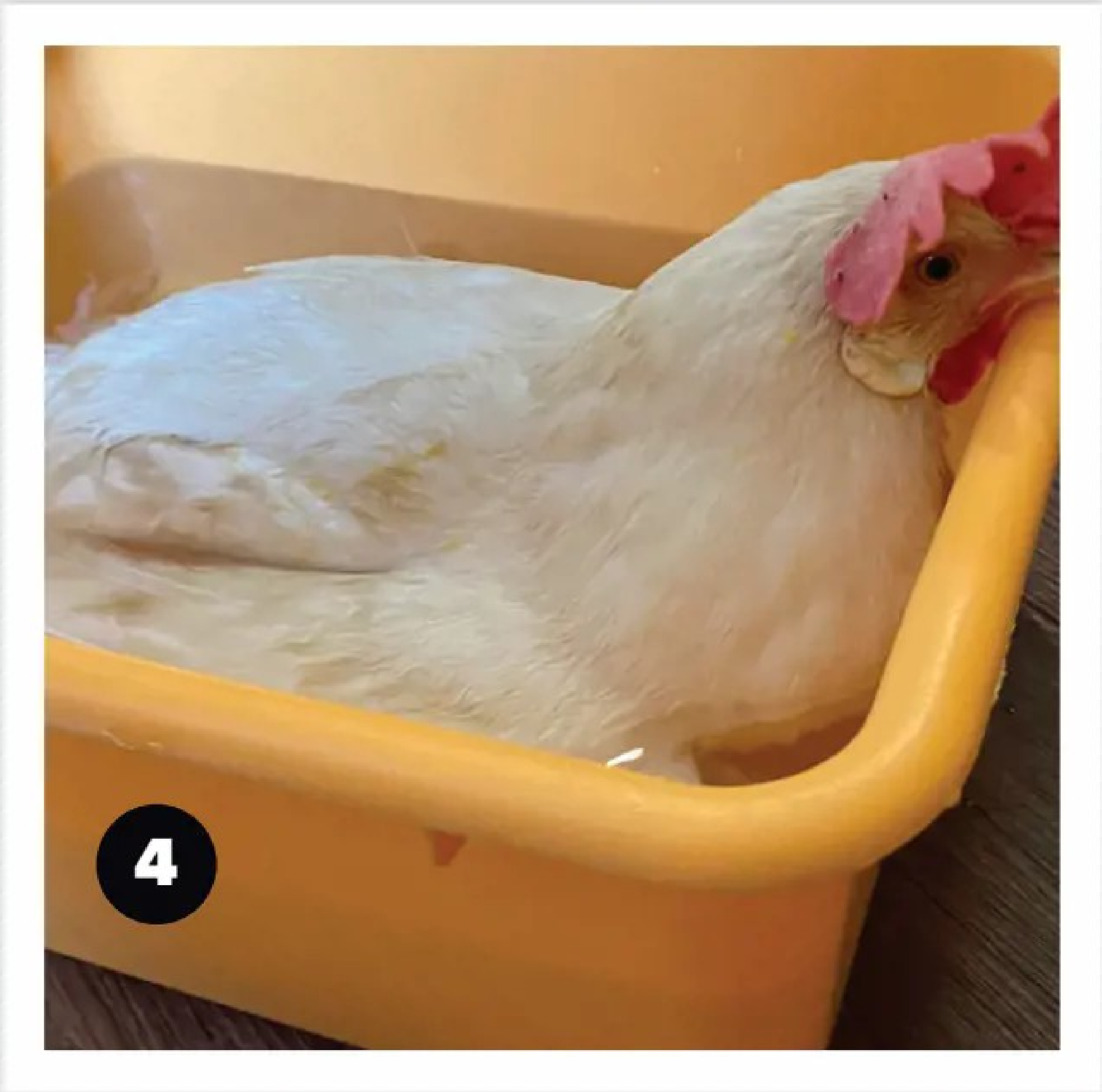
General Store

Bring the chickens inside with rooster, hen and chic(k) décor.

compiled by Sarah E. Coleman

MARINA KUCHENBECKER/STOCK.ADOBE.COM





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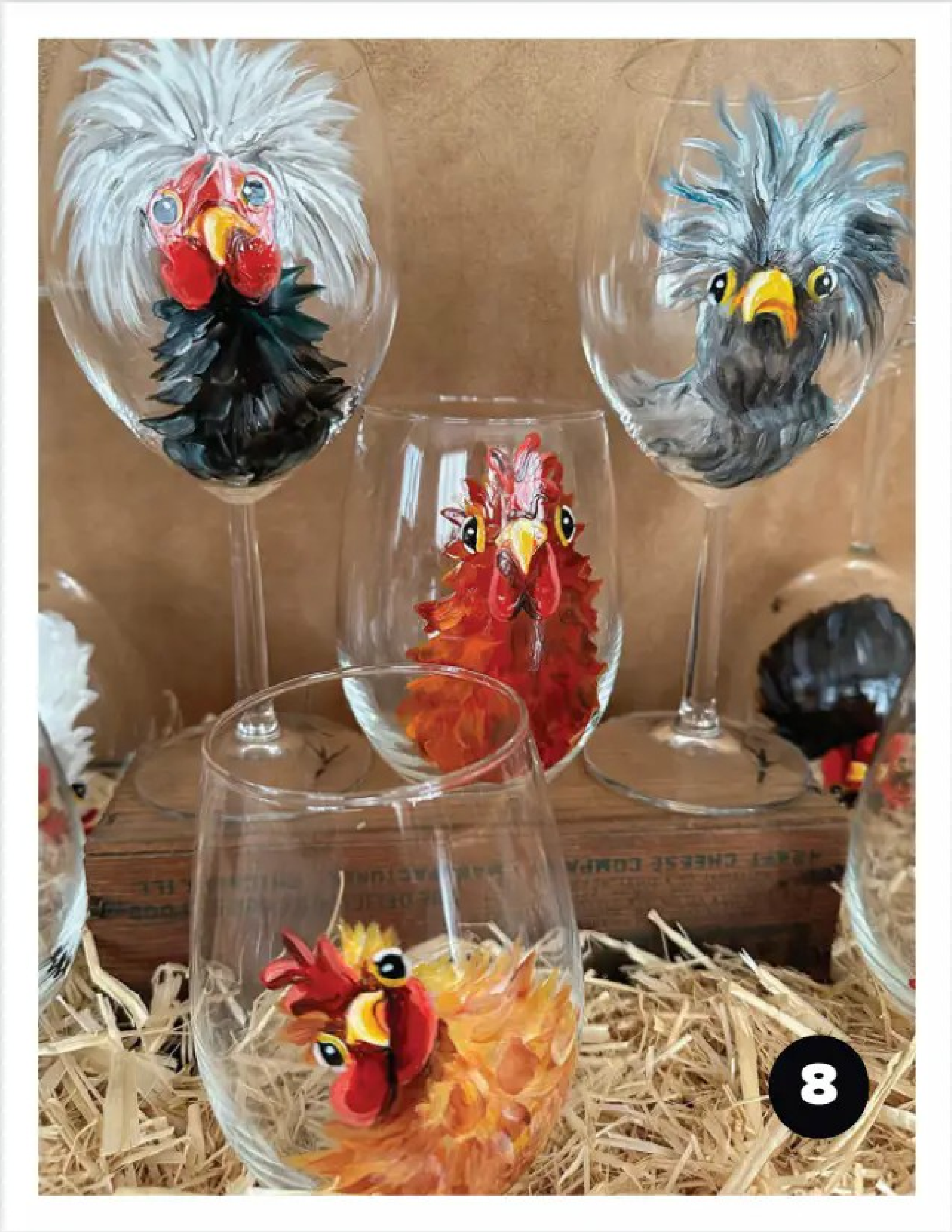

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THE truth ABOUT…

What's it really like keeping Rhode Island Red, Golden Comet, Barred Plymouth Rock and Serama chicken breeds.

BY ANA HOTALING

Before I started writing for *Hobby Farms* and *Chickens*, before I focused my journalism on agricultural topics, I was known as the Chelsea Chicken Lady — one of the two individuals responsible for getting the city of Chelsea, Michigan, to legalize backyard flocks. But even before that, I was a longtime chicken owner, helping friends, family, neighbors and perfect strangers choose chicken breeds and navigate poultry issues. I was called on for help during Chick Days by local feed and farm-supply stores and folks knew I exhibited my birds at poultry shows around the Midwest. And long before that, I was a kid who helped take care of her grandmother's rooster and hens.

It's safe to say that chickens have been part of my life for most of my existence. It's also safe to say that, over the years, I've gotten to know numerous different breeds of chickens. My close association with poultry has given me insight into these chicken breeds, insight that many microflock owners have counted on to help guide their breed choices with questions like, "I'm thinking about [insert breed of interest here], and I read that they are docile/flighty/aggressive/poor layers/great mothers/etc. What's the honest truth?"

The honest truth is that I can only go by my decades of experience. I do know that what I've encountered with a few chicken breeds completely contradicts the general information found online. So … get out your salt shaker, because those grains of salt may come in handy as you read my honest truth about the 18 chicken breeds we've raised over the years. Here are the first five.

RHODE ISLAND RED

A trio of two-week-old Rhode Island Red (RIR) chicks joined our farm after I received a call from our farm-supply store. The three babies were the last peeps from that hatchery

SUPERGROOVIE74/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

Golden Comets are a product of two established breeds, the New Hampshire Red and White Rock.

JACKIENIX/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

A Rhode Island Red (left) and a Plymouth Rock (right) head into the coop.

shipment, and the newer arrivals were physically attacking these older hatchlings.

The poor little things were Blu Koted and miserable when I picked them up. They spent the first day huddled together in the corner of their brooder, not even approaching the feeder or waterer. It took a lot of TLC to get them to finally feel safe enough to start exploring their new home.

By the end of their second week with us, you'd never have known they'd been bullied. Aside from our Orpingtons, I've never seen such a genuinely happy breed of birds. The RIRs were cheerfully chatty and actively played with each other. We had to give them little boxes in which they played hide and seek and napped together.

As they grew older, the RIRs retained their good-natured dispositions. They were almost doglike with their affection. The trio eventually proclaimed themselves to be two pullets and a cockerel, which led to a little heartache for me because we did not have room for another rooster.

Fortunately, I found a nearby 4-H family seeking a showmanship bird for their daughter. Red Boy (not a very original name, I know) took to the young girl very quickly when she and her parents came to see him. Within minutes, she was cuddling and cooing to him, and Red Boy never really looked back.

As for Lynn and Vanessa, the two RIR pullets, they eagerly merged with our Orpington flock, where they became the "popular girls"—our Orps all wanted to be their friends. Helen and Vanessa became prolific layers, producing four to five light-brown eggs per week. Neither had any health or weather issues, and they both lived to be 7 years old.

A little joy went out of the Orpington flock when these cheerful chickens passed on. I'm not sure why we never got more RIRs, given our very positive experience with them.

GOLDEN COMET

Also known as a Cinnamon Queen or a Red Star, the Golden Comet is a stunning cinnamon-gold chicken and one of the most popular hybrid

SHARON/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

Barred Plymouth Rocks, also known as Barred Rocks, are docile, gentle and super friendly.

backyard birds in America. When we first met Goldie, however, she was anything but beautiful.

I had once again gotten a call from our farm-supply store that one of their older chicks needed rescuing. Jae and I grabbed a cardboard box and headed out, only to find this poor baby cowering on top of the stock tank's waterer, most of her down plucked out by the younger chicks.

Once home, we carefully treated Goldie's injuries, then set her inside a cozy brooder with a plush bunny for company. After a few days, Goldie made the move from the top of the waterer to the bunny. I experienced a moment of panic when I came across an empty brooder, only to find Goldie snuggled safely under the bunny's arm.

Goldie's relationship with her bunny lasted her entire life.

As an older pullet, she also joined our Orpington flock and, while she was sweet and got along with the other birds, there was always some hesitancy, as if she remembered the abuse she sustained in her earliest days. Goldie ended up making two close Orpington friends, with whom she spent her days. At night, she slept in one of the nest boxes, snuggled up with her bunny.

Goldie was one of the best layers we ever had, producing between five and six large brown eggs per week. She never exhibited any tendency towards broodiness and, interestingly, she never laid in the nest box where her bunny lived. She was always sweet with us, even with my boys when they were preschoolers. If we had not defined ourselves as a heritage farm, I would not have minded having more Golden Comets … as long as the chicks had plenty of room so as not to pick on each other.

BARRED PLYMOUTH ROCK

Like the RIRs and Goldie the Golden Comet, our Barred Plymouth Rocks were rescued from a local feed store, where they were the last Barred Rocks amidst a sea of Wyandotte chicks. Knowing they were with Wyandottes probably spurred us to retrieve this chick quartet swiftly, as we had just sold off our Wyandotte flock the previous year.

The Barred Rock babies were not victimized in the way our other rescues had been. They were not injured or missing any down. Instead, the Wyandotte crowd was preventing the Barred Rocks from accessing the feeder and waterer, and the store only had so many brooders. Home they came!

From the start, the Barred Rocks settled in happily, sleeping chick-carpet style and curiously investigating their brooder. They were very inquisitive birds from the get go, even as adults. If we placed anything—a suet cake, a wedge of cabbage, a block of seeds—in their brooder or coop, the Barred Rocks would be the first ones to approach, even before our rooster. The Orpington hens would always wait for the all-clear from the Barred Rocks before inching closer to whatever the mystery treat might be.

Although they were never bossy, they also weren't overly social with the other birds, preferring to keep to themselves or hang out with us if we were outside. They laid an average of three to four large brown eggs per week and occasionally went broody, though nowhere to the extent that the Orpingtons, Cochins and Silkies did.

They were adorable chicks, with their creamy head dots and smoky black fluff, and even more lovely as adults, with their trademark black barring. They didn't live past 4 years old, which might be a reflection on their being hatchery birds versus breeder birds. I'd call them your basic backyard chickens, good for eggs and with a decent disposition.

SERAMA

I fell in love with the Serama chicken breed the instant I set eyes on them. It was at a small poultry exhibition in Northern Michigan. I'd made sure my show birds were settled in, then went to explore the rest of the show floor.

The Serama exhibitor — she was the only one— had a table off to one side of the hall, with cages more suited to canaries in size than to chickens. Inside each cage were the tiniest chickens I'd ever seen, each pure perfection.

The Serama roosters had a proud, puffed chest; upright carriage; downward wings; and tiny single combs. The hens displayed glossy eyes, teeny wattles and tidy tails.

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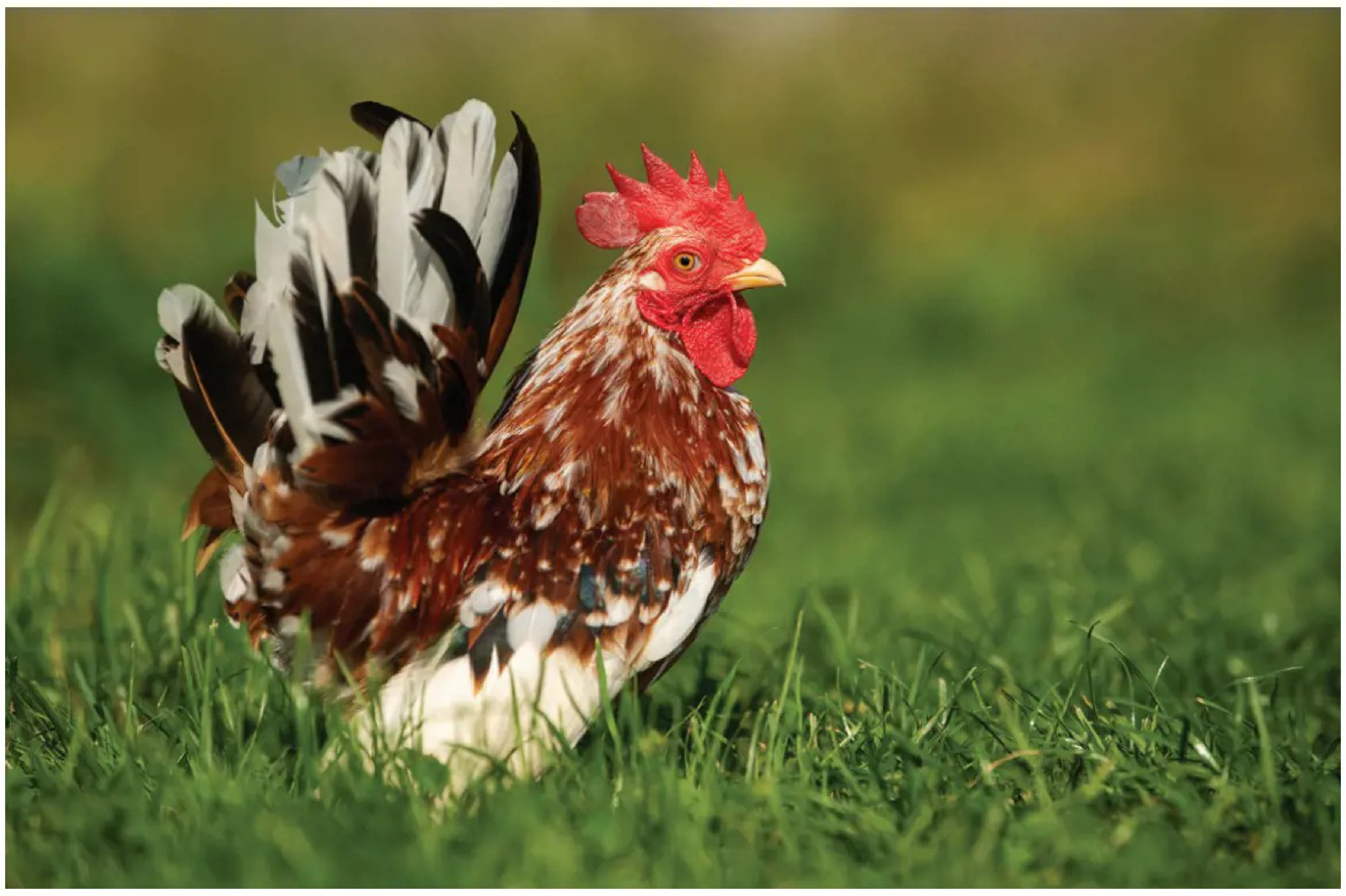
When the weekend was done, I went home with a beautiful black and white pair. Orion and Oreo were the first of many Serama chickens lovingly raised and hatched by us.

Purely ornamental, the Serama is the smallest known chicken breed, with adult males typically weighing in at less than a pound and adult females even less.

Because of their size, they are not cold hardy. We built heated brooders in our pole barn, where they cozily passed the cold months. Seramas love being outside, however, so we also built them a chicken tractor within which they could safely enjoy the sunshine, grass and fresh air.



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Seramas are one of the world's smallest recognized breeds of chicken.

While ideal as exhibition birds, Seramas also make wonderful household pets. They truly love interacting with their humans, will happily spend hours perched on their owner's shoulder or on the back of a chair or couch, and can be contentedly housed in a parrot cage.

Our Serama chickens always paired up as juveniles and remained mated for life. The hens laid well, averaging approximately four eggs per week, but bear in mind that four Serama eggs equal one large standard chicken egg.

Serama hens will go broody, and it is a delight to watch them set eggs and raise their young, because Seramas are without a doubt the chattiest breed in existence. Hens tend to keep a continual monologue going with their eggs and chicks.

Chicks hatch at about 16 days, five days earlier than other chicken breeds. The juveniles similarly become fully feathered and reach maturity ahead of other breeds. I adored our Serama flock, despite the special allowances necessary because of their size and physique. And although my husband, Jae, deems them "impractical," Seramas rank in my top six chicken breeds along with Orpingtons, Silkies, Cochins, Ameraucanas and Polish.

Ana Hotaling and her husband, Jae, own FMA Farms, a heritage-poultry farm in southeast Michigan.

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Winter Treats for Your Chickens

It's winter. It's cold and unforgiving. You're a little bored, feeling cooped up inside and start to get hunger pangs. Do you head to the fridge or cupboard? It's common to turn to food to combat the cold and the seclusion and boredom of the winter months. Chickens feel that way, too. Luckily for the chickens in our charge, winter treats can be healthy and nutritious, and their boredom-busting properties can benefit your birds in multiple ways. Here are a few great winter treats to consider—always in moderation, of course.

1. SCRATCH: Scratch, a blended mix of cracked corn and other whole grains, is the quintessential winter chicken treat. The energy required to digest the scratch grains increases the bird's body heat, helping to keep it warmer just when needed it most. Toss some on the ground to let your flock exercise their slumbering foraging skills.

2. GREENS: It's no mystery that greens and fresh vegetables are in rather short supply in most locales during the winter months. Without grass, weeds and other greens to forage, egg yolks begin to pale and chickens lose their pizazz. When in doubt, chop up and toss some leftover salad greens to your ladies — ideally, sans dressing — for a nutritional boost. You may even choose to sprout some greens in your kitchen.

3. Mealworms and Other Protein: Supplementing your flock's diet with protein, offered in cautious and mindful moderation, can be a wonderful way to support a molting bird's needs during fall and winter. Mealworms, either dried or live, are hands-down an absolute favorite of nearly every backyard flock that's ever been offered the luxury. Other sources of protein include scrambled eggs and canned (cooked) fish.

4. Toasty, Tasty Treats: For most of us, winter weather ushers in some serious need for warm comfort foods. Warm oatmeal, jazzed up with some raisins or other small, dried fruits, is a decadent treat for any flock. Other warm options include cooked lentils and a split pea soup. Dried oats, peas, beans and legumes can often be found in the bulk section of your grocery store, making this an affordable treat even if slightly time-consuming. Some of these items require soaking before the cooking process, so plan for a bit of preparation. For an added protein, mineral and nutrient boost, cook lentils, beans or peas in beef broth or bone stock.

LAST Squawk

“Not all breeds of chickens will handle cold weather the same. Heavier breeds such as Plymouth Rock, Wyandotte, Ameraucana and Orpington overwinter well. Smaller breeds have less feathering or have large combs and wattles and may need extra care to stay warm, maintain body weight and keep healthy during cold weather. … Huddling together, holding a foot up to their breast or puffing their feathers are all signs that your chickens may be cold.”

— “CARING FOR CHICKENS IN COLD WEATHER,” BY COLLEEN CARLSON, EXTENSION EDUCATOR, & HANNAH LOCHNER, MARKETING ASSISTANT, UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA EXTENSION

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